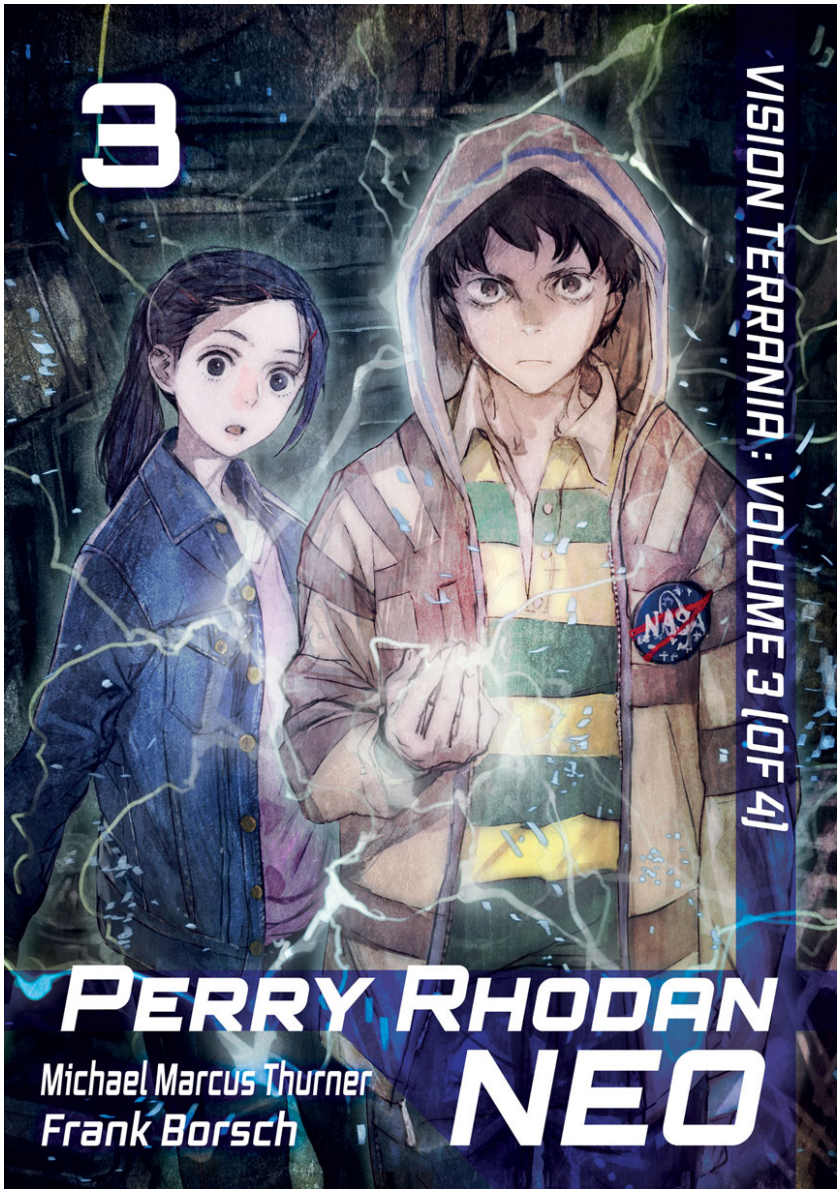
3
VISION TERRANIA: VOLUME 3 (OF 4)
PERRY RHODAN NEO
Michael Marcus Thurner
Frank Borsch

Perry Rhodan NEO: Volume 3 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10
11. Part 11
12. Part 12

3
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Episode 5: School for Mutants

By Michael Marcus Thurner

1.

The Performance

July 8, 2036

High up in the sky, fireworks were exploding. Chinese fireworks. They carried conventional warheads with low levels of stray radiation, and they became ensnared in the defensive shield that protected Perry Rhodan and the nascent city known as Terrania. They were probably Dongfeng-67B models with micro GPS systems, a circular error probable of not even ten meters, and maneuverable warheads. Each of these projectiles cost a fortune, and each achieved nothing but its own destruction.

These bombs were the most important components of the arsenal that had been trying to break through the Arkonide barrier for days now, but they weren't the only ones. They were bolstered by conventional DH-class cruise missiles, which had for years played a large role in Chinese "defense" strategies and were feared in the west for their impressive maneuverability. The missiles' inertial navigation systems were the best in the world by far.

Perry Rhodan looked upwards, equal parts tired and apprehensive; there was no one around for whom he needed to feign confidence. The barrage of fire was exhausting him. The constant *ba-bam* that rang out with the standard acoustic delay was wearing on his nerves.

Ba-bam. Ba-bam. Ba-bam.

For the past few days, the imposing Arkonide robots had been his only company.

And they're not exactly great at it.

He needed conversation. He had to know what was going on in the world around him. At the moment, he was cut off from all information channels. The Chinese had installed high-powered

jammers around the dome. General Bai Jun knew his stuff, that much was clear. He was combating Rhodan's superior technology with attrition tactics and endless patience.

Rhodan started wiping the sweat from his brow, then froze mid-motion. Something had changed. The bombardment of the defensive shield had abated. The cruise missiles' launch and transport vehicles, mainly trucks with eight-axle trailers, model HY-664, had likely been repositioned to aim at a new target beyond the horizon.

The *Stardust*.

"The Terran ship is returning," said the nearest robot in slurred-sounding English.

"Do you have a com link?"

"No. However, I can detect pieces of equipment that came from the *Aetron*. I have intermittent contact with structurally identical robotic units. The Terran pilot is executing some odd maneuvers that seem inexpedient for his goal."

The *Stardust* was being shot at, and the attackers had a good chance of landing a hit. For a ship that reacted so sluggishly in the Earth's atmosphere, the landing maneuvers took far more time than the launch.

"Diversionary tactics as planned!" Rhodan ordered.

In the blink of an eye, two of the robots went into action along with one of the enormous work machines. They rushed at high speed to the side of the shield that had been under the heaviest fire in recent days. Gaps in the structure formed, through which the three Arkonide creations left the energy cocoon. From there, they proceeded to the presumed positions of the Chinese army. Rhodan had instructed them to put on a performance that drew as much attention as possible from the landing spacecraft. Then, before they ran the risk of being destroyed by one of the enemy's powerful projectiles, they were to blow themselves to smithereens.

For a moment, there was only silence. Four contrails ran across the sky towards the east like parallel lines scratched by a rake. Rhodan slipped into his Arkonide-made battledress, a suit so advanced that it almost seemed miraculous. He'd gotten the knack for putting it on by now and managed it in under three seconds, assisted by the stunningly intelligent positronic computer.

There was no contemplation anymore. No hesitation. He knew what he had to do. A decisive feeling rose up within him—the certainty that he was doing the right thing. He wasn't reacting anymore, but acting. Anticipating what the soldiers would do before they even knew it themselves.

Perry Rhodan had earned his reputation as the "instantaneous adapter." He used the battledress to raise himself into the air, ready for the conflict. Ready to keep the worst from happening.

There was the *Stardust*, at a height of around two kilometers. A new armada of Chinese missiles was flying from all directions at this tiny-looking target in the sky. The ship was moving at a speed of around seven hundred kilometers per hour.

Bull was pulling off evasive maneuvers with the gallant deftness Rhodan knew his friend for. Even if he would never achieve the same piloting proficiency as Rhodan himself, Bull possessed awe-inspiring skills when it came to steering the spacecraft.

Some of the rockets flew past their target while others exploded early. An area of several kilometers was temporarily irradiated with an equivalent dose in the region of a few hundred microsieverts, but as sad as it was, that problem wasn't paramount right now.

The important thing was that Bull survived. That Rhodan somehow ensured the *Stardust* made it back to the ground in one piece.

He rose higher until he was only slightly below the roof of the energy shield. Looking around, he saw that the three Arkonide machines had already advanced deep into the Chinese military's territory. They were making the sand swirl dozens of meters into

the air, to create a bigger distraction and confuse the enemy drones.

He considered whether he should switch more of the Arkonide robots over to this task, but no, there wasn't enough time. In the sky above him, the shots had become significantly more frequent again. The soldiers had overcome their initial surprise.

Details of the *Stardust* were now visible to the naked eye. Rhodan observed and drew some conclusions. No matter how skillfully Bull had combined Arkonide drive components with those from Earth, it was clear that the two sets of technology were not designed to work together. The craft's fins twitched restlessly back and forth; he could hardly keep the ship steady.

Bull had deployed enough thrust that he was eluding the Chinese attacks, but that reduced stability even further. Rhodan suspected the telemetric data collected by thousands of onboard sensors couldn't be processed quickly enough anymore.

The Stardust *is a lead balloon*, he thought. *One without any helium.*

One of the robots informed him of its imminent self-destruction. Directly afterwards, Rhodan glimpsed a tremendous geyser of sand, followed by a shock wave and a violent crash. Hundreds of Chinese infantrymen were thrown to the ground or whirled about like leaves.

All the while, the assault on the *Stardust* continued. The leadership ranks under Bai Jun's command wouldn't let themselves be deterred.

"All robots, up to my level!" Rhodan ordered, fearing the worst.

The machines obeyed. As they gained more and more height, they looked like insects who scoffed at the laws of gravity. They rose up to him, to the new gaps in the shield that Rhodan was opening.

He raced forward and passed through the dome. Higher, ever higher, towards the *Stardust* and the three-dimensional minefield surrounding it. Without thinking about his own safety. Without a

single thought to spare for the danger. A friend needed his help.

That one, right there! The missile that would deliver the final devastating blow. Rhodan anticipated it, felt it, *knew* it. It was the last in a long series of shots that had been haphazardly fired in quick succession. A Dongfeng, as he'd feared. He was pretty sure he could even identify the warhead: this variety was called Xiè. "Harmony." It carried the equivalent of a megatonne of TNT to its target. It would blast the *Stardust* out of the sky without leaving a speck of dust behind.

"Robot Three, intercept that missile! All other units, prepare to approach the ship. We're getting Bull out of there!"

Number three got moving. It accelerated and hunted down its target on a flight path that brought it close to the *Stardust*. Too close.

Rhodan held his breath as he accelerated as well, bearing down on the ship with assistance from the suit's Positronic. What he was doing was madness, but he knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was the right course of action.

By now, Robot Three was visible only as a tiny speck colliding with the tip of the missile's fifteen-meter-long body. The explosion followed as soon as Rhodan looked. He closed his eyes a fraction of a second too late—the blast of white light imprinted itself on his retinas so strongly that it left a pinprick-sized hole in his vision where he thought he'd never see anything through again.

It hardly mattered.

Light. Heat. Torrents of air. Pressure. Radiation that made the suit give off alarming signals. Control malfunctions. Everything spun around him. "Earth" and "sky" were arbitrary terms; there was no up and no down. He was stricken with nausea. His ears rang.

"Stabilize!" he grunted into the microphone. The vocal command was a necessity right now. The intuitive method of passing orders to the suit via body movements was not currently possible.

At last, the chaos subsided. Rhodan could again draw a distinction between the pale gray of the desert sand and the blue of the sky. A piece of metal plunged right past him. A burst tube; no doubt an element of the Dongfeng's solid propellant stage.

The sky darkened. Rhodan craned his neck upwards. Roughly five hundred meters above him was the *Stardust*—or rather, what was left of it. It was a lacerated capsule with tubes hanging out like entrails and parts falling off by the second.

One of those parts was a human body.

"Bull!" he cried, speeding straight towards his plummeting friend. Only then did he see another human figure spinning unstoppably downwards. Towards the ground, a kilometer below them.

"Secure the humans!" Rhodan commanded.

He didn't give any more thought to who or what had been on board. From that moment, everything ran intuitively. Grasping the limp body, securing it, diving under the cloud of debris from the ship... All these lightning fast actions were carried out partly by the Positronic and partly under his orders.

Something struck his arm. He felt a brief moment of pain. The suit flashed error messages and recommended a hasty emergency landing.

Below him, several more explosions occurred one after another. The robots carrying out his diversionary tactics were consumed by blazing infernos.

After the booming of the double explosion came a moment of absolute silence that never seemed to end. No Chinese missiles were visible in the sky anymore, and there was silence on the ground as well. Rhodan felt like he was getting a teaser of the peace of the grave.

Then he realized... He was deaf! More and more of the suits' functions were failing, and that had included the ear protection.

Suddenly, the man in his arms felt impossibly heavy. The dead weight of the Arkonide suit made itself known. Rhodan was essentially wearing a high-tech version of a knight's armor, and it had to weigh at least fifty kilograms.

"Emergency systems activated!" a voice squawked. "Preparing for emergency landing."

It smelled like something was burning. Rhodan was sure he could feel fire spreading across his back, and boiling hot molten metal running down the protective suit. Bolts of discharged electricity crackled through the hefty chestpiece. The positronic AI gave optical and aural warnings.

There were still five hundred meters left to the ground. The force of the detonation had blown him sideways towards the camps filled with civilians that Rhodan had lured to the Gobi Desert with his speech a few days earlier. Hundreds were pointing at him with outstretched arms. He could practically hear the crowd's murmurs and screams of fright.

So many sensations. So many images. They swirled and blended together until it was hard to take it all in and know what was real, what mattered.

He tried to get his bearings. There was a single robot in the immediate vicinity. An identifier appeared on his heads-up display. "Five—to me!" he ordered. "Take this man off my hands!"

The machine raced over, sometimes above Rhodan, sometimes below. Smoke engulfed him. It was coming from his own back. The anti-grav kicked in, slowing his fall a little—and then petered out again.

Rhodan was spinning uncontrollably towards the ground. A rendezvous with the robot seemed impossible. He let go of the man in his arms and just let him fall. Robot number five did as told and saw to the unconscious figure. It dived under Rhodan and safely caught the man. Then it flew in a zigzag course, weaving through the whirling pieces of the wrecked *Stardust*.

Three hundred meters left.

"Make gaps in the shield and get the humans to safety!" he ordered the robots. Then, to the suit, he said, "Activate emergency mode!"

A kind of joystick rose out of the left glove. With the right, he did what he'd practiced repeatedly over the past few days: he intervened in the Arkonide suit's controls. He checked the function routines, then slid deeper into the menu to bypass the positronic control circuits and divert power. He gave the anti-grav as much power as possible, counterbalanced the spinning motion, and switched to reverse thrust. It was a maneuver worthy of one of the best trained fighter pilots in the US Navy.

Below him, the rocks loomed ever larger. He could see his own shadow grow by the second from a dot the size of a matchstick to a clearly defined shape with an irregular outline. The anti-grav kicked in again, and not a moment too soon! It slowed his descent speed while also introducing g-forces strong enough to force the air from his lungs and push him to the edge of his physical endurance.

Rhodan breathed in ravenously and blinked the sweat out of his eyes. He felt sick. *Just don't throw up! Not now!* He suppressed the urge as best he could and brought himself into an upright position.

With the aid of the joystick controls, he touched down, making a rough landing on the ground. The energy shield was about a hundred meters away from him. When he moved again, he left imprints several centimeters deep. He was a burning torch visible far and wide.

There were people behind him. Camp members; no doubt Chinese soldiers too. They were running after him, the lunatics! Some because they wanted to catch him, and others because they venerated him or wanted to help him.

The suit grew stiffer and stiffer. Rhodan heard a grinding sound, as if mechanical parts were scraping past each other and locking together. Every step felt like torture.

The defensive shield. Just twenty more meters. “Open a gap!” he commanded. Miraculously, the Positronic reacted. It sent the required identifier signal as Rhodan dragged himself to the fizzling archway, to safety...

Something hit him. A stray bullet from a Chinese sharpshooter must have caught him! It struck his right shoulder blade. Pain coursed through him.

He threw himself forward through the gate and gave the order to close it. Then he rolled back and forth on the sand. He had to put out the fire and free himself as quickly as possible from the battledress. All its communication signals had steadily died out. Only one last message remained: a report of total system breakdown. Rhodan deactivated the last functions and removed himself from the suit. Leaving it there, he hurried away, fearing an explosion.

None came. Instead, the suit began to deform itself. For a while it was surrounded by a shimmering blue cloud of energy, and then it shrank into an ungainly blackened hunk of metal.

Rhodan stood there panting, his hands resting on his knees. He took the moment not only to catch his breath, but also to arrange his disarrayed thoughts.

His shoulder hurt, but the bullet hadn’t penetrated the suit. He’d have a bruise for a while as a souvenir of his foray outside of the dome. His head was pounding, but he was used to that effect by now. His legs were like rubber and his arm muscles intensely sore. His hearing gradually came back, and his mind started to work again too.

“Everything’s A-OK, buddy,” he said quietly to himself.

No. Nothing was okay! Right outside the shield, hundreds of people were pushing and shoving. The Chinese soldiers had their hands full keeping the heaving masses from colliding with the energy barrier. Just this once, Rhodan was grateful that the army’s forces stood firm against the civilians.

They'd all witnessed his failure.

They'd all seen the *Stardust* exploding and an Arkonide battledress burning out. The mystique of being able to indefinitely withstand the most powerful army on Earth was suffering from bigger and more visible cracks with each passing day.

No brooding! he warned himself. *Other things matter more. Much more.*

He glanced around. In front of him lay several giant pieces of the *Stardust*, smoldering or melted beyond all recognition. Some of them showed characteristics of Arkonide technology. The same AI that maintained the defensive shield had made holes in order to catch these pieces.

Other people were there as well, forming strange pairs with the Arkonide robots. Bull trudged over to him, cursing and hurling pieces of his suit away. His own example of this miraculous piece of foreign technology was evidently damaged beyond repair too.

"Welcome back," said Rhodan. "You could have cut down on the theatrics just a little, don't you think?"

"What would be the fun in that?" Bull smirked and wiped some blood off his face. This revealed a scar a few centimeters long on his left cheek; a second adorned his forehead, reaching from his left eyebrow up to his hairline.

"You look awful."

"You're not exactly an oil painting yourself right now, Perry."

Manly posturing. Downplay any worries and difficulties. Whatever you do, don't show any pain, any vulnerability... "You brought some guests?"

"Reluctantly." Bull gestured towards two men in American uniforms who were standing beside each other and looking around. "You know Deringhouse and Nyssen. And this lovely pair over here are our Great Russian friends, Darya Morosova and Alexander Baturin."

Russians and Americans who were eyeing each other with suspicion and didn't know a thing about developments down here on Earth. A twist of fate had brought them here to the fledgling city of Terrania. Rhodan would have to hold intensive talks with the four guests. He hoped he hadn't lost his powers of persuasion.

Why did he feel no strong reaction, no sense of surprise? He took in the names of the astronauts and cosmonauts with barely a second thought. He could guess what had happened on the Moon. Bull would fill in the details as soon as time allowed. In the meantime, it was taking everything he had to handle the disappointment. The *Stardust* had been destroyed. They'd lost a great deal of their equipment. Everything lay in ruins.

The dream of a dominant power that didn't belong to any of the world's military blocs seemed to be dead.

2.

The Circle

July 4, 2036

The cottages had names like “Lúcás Ó Ceallaigh,” “Ciarán Burke,” “Barney McKenna,” and “Ránall Ó Draoi.” They were names that meant nothing to John Marshall and that he didn’t particularly care about either. They were just another part of the scenery he’d gotten mixed up in that he didn’t understand. And that, if he was honest, he didn’t *want* to understand either.

The one and only thing that mattered was the boy lying in the bedroom of Lúcás Ó Ceallaigh, the house whose thatched roof was an unusual shade of red.

A strong gust of wind blew past him. He stumbled forward a step, then caught himself and stood with his legs farther apart than before. He hated the wind, which was blowing more strongly now in these early morning hours than it had been before. He hated the vastness that spread out before him.

Well, not quite. He was afraid of it. It was too different to everything he was used to in the United States. There was grass here so powerfully green that it stung his eyes. There was slimy, salt-encrusted kelp spread out in a strip to dry. There was a small notch in the terrain; Mercant had explained this to him as a kind of vestige that marked where a line of peat had been cut out some years ago.

Beyond that were the beaches covered in more kelp that had washed ashore. And the sea, with foam-crested waves that thundered and roared against the tiny patches of land as if they wanted to drag the island away—not over millions of years, but now, right now.

On the other hand, he was enjoying the distance from people. The sound of others’ thoughts, which he’d heard with increasing

clarity in recent days, was now only a faint hum, distant, vague, and monotone.

This tiny island was unlike anything he'd known so far. Across the entire rest of the world, people were talking about Perry Rhodan's return from space, share prices were crashing on the major stock exchanges, agitators were rattling their sabers, and delirious fanatics were singing the hymn of the imminent apocalypse. Meanwhile, here on Owey Island, off the coast of northwestern Ireland, there was nothing but glorious quiet. It was like time was standing still. For all he knew, it was.

"What are you thinking about?"

Marshall jumped. He hadn't heard Sue coming. That was rare.

"That we're little pieces of nothing," he answered contemplatively. "That we're cocky enough to believe we're the rulers of this wonderful planet, and that that entitles us to treat it with disrespect. To poison it and ruin it."

"I don't get what you mean," Sue replied. She sounded anxious. Overwhelmed.

"You know, I'm not sure I do either." John turned to the girl and looked her up and down. "You look good."

"You think so?" She received his little compliment with a shy smile.

"If this island had any boys your age, I'd have to lock you up somewhere to keep you safe from their advances."

"You liar." She smiled again, but a moment later it was overshadowed by the constant distrust that she'd never escape from. "You're not making fun of me, are you?"

"Nope," he said, entirely serious. "I think you're really pretty."

It was true; he did. Despite her body, which was more suited to a ten-year-old than a fifteen-year-old. And despite her crippled left arm, which ended in a stump she could hardly move. This girl who

could have been his daughter had an unbelievable presence. One that it was possible only he saw and had a rudimentary perception of.

Sue's entire face reddened. She pulled her head down between her shoulders as if scared of his appraisal.

"Shall we check on Sid?" Marshall asked.

"Y-Yes." The young girl sounded even more insecure than usual. Despite her gift, she hadn't been able to help Sid. It upset her to have let down one of her best friends.

He linked arms with her, feeling the light resistance that quickly vanished, and pulled her along with him. Onwards to Lúcás Ó Ceallaigh. "Time to see how our problem child is doing."

The next gust of wind brought rain along with it, suddenly and unexpectedly. He shuddered as it blasted him with water, leaving a light salty taste in his mouth, disheveling his hair, and soaking his vest. His pants stayed dry, at least, apart from a few splashes.

The water tasted bitter.

"I could never get used to this weather," said Sue, drawing closer to him.

"They say they don't really have weather on the Irish islands. There are just times when it rains extra hard and rare occasions when the rain is interrupted by a few seconds of dryness."

"The people here must have a weird sense of humor," she remarked. Marshall was pretty sure she'd read that sentence in an old Kindle novel.

"They're used to misery. Especially since climate change has made conditions on their island even worse. And then the financial crisis..." Marshall stopped short. These were topics he'd been concerned with in a former life. Back when he'd needed to know which crazy factors could impact share prices.

They reached the moss-covered wooden door of Lúcás Ó

Ceallaigh. The blackened iron door handle squeaked as he turned it. The owner of the settlement—and the entire island—evidently had a strange flair for the romantic that in no way fit with his other behavior.

They entered the main room. A man in a white coat stood there. He had just finished packing his suitcase. Marshall nodded to him and received an equally silent greeting in reply. This doctor was one of the accomplices Homer G. Adams had gathered around him. Another sat in the darkest corner of the room with the appearance of a well-fed closet. Like the real item of furniture, he had a habit of never saying a word.

"Can we see the kid, doctor?" asked Marshall.

"Of course." The doctor cast a scrutinizing glance at them. "He knows you two?"

"Better than anyone else here," came Marshall's straightforward answer.

"Then you're probably just the medicine he needs. Talk to Sid. Make sure his mind stays focused. Stays with you."

"I don't understand."

The doctor sighed. "From a medical point of view, the boy's healthy. Weak but healthy. Whatever he has that's keeping him from getting better, its origins are in his psyche. In a realm I can't access."

"Then he needs to talk to a therapist." John Marshall was shocked by his own words. How could he be so brazen as to demand more help from their benefactor?

Their *presumed* benefactor. Homer G. Adams had proven himself a generous host; a savior in their time of need. A philanthropist who had dared to stand up against the might of Homeland Security and would no doubt reap the consequences of it before long. What else could he ask of the man?

Could he have gotten it all wrong, though? Had they jumped out

of the frying pan and into the fire? Or were they about to be presented with a hefty bill?

No. Marshall trusted Adams. There was something about him that...tasted right. Or smelled right. Or however he should describe the extra sense he'd been grappling with more intensely every day.

The nameless doctor interrupted Marshall's musings. "Give him strength. And be careful with everything you say. The psyche is a vast realm. Despite all the knowledge we've obtained about the human mind over the last few decades, we still know far too little about the mechanisms that drive it."

"Yeah."

"Mr. Adams is with the patient. Speak to him. He'll be able to give you more information."

"Adams is with Sid?" Sue asked. She looked confused.

"Since the early hours. If you'll excuse me, my helicopter awaits." With one last nod, he exited the large living room. Sue and Marshall were left alone with the silent closet-man, who showed no sign of looking up from his current occupation: intensively cleaning his fingernails using the latest model of Swiss Army knife.

"Well, let's head in," said Marshall.

"Yeah." Sue, who had long since freed herself from his grasp, pushed closer again. "John?"

"What is it, kid?"

"I'm scared shitless! About Sid. Of Adams. Of the future. It's all so...so...messed up and incomprehensible."

"I really don't like that expression." Marshall attempted a smile. "But I'm scared shitless too. Only one way to conquer that, though."

"Yeah?"

"We have to face up to it. Or would you rather run from it?"

“We wouldn’t get very far, right? We’d either drown in the ocean or drown in that damn rain before we got there.”

“You see! There’s only one way to go, and that’s straight ahead.”

Marshall crossed the living room with Sue in tow. The door was ajar. He entered the room where Sid lay in repose, maybe forever.

Sid was asleep. His forehead was sweaty. Several thin needles stuck out from the skin above his left shoulder blade. These no doubt penetrated deep inside to regulate his body functions.

Homer G. Adams was sitting next to the boy and dabbing his head with a wet towel. The old man looked at them with eager anticipation. Even though no tiredness was visible on his face, Marshall sensed that this fabulously wealthy man was teetering on the edge of exhaustion.

“I thought you’d come here sooner,” he said.

“We had a lot of sleep to catch up on.”

“No. You were afraid of this moment.”

“That too,” Marshall admitted frankly.

“The doctor says Sid is doing well, ‘given the circumstances.’ He wasn’t forthcoming as to what he meant by ‘the circumstances,’ however.”

“We’ve met him.”

“He’s a narrow-minded fool with no imagination and no concept of anything outside his own field. That’s why I’ve sent him back to the mainland. I’m expecting some other…associates in the next few hours who will be able to help Sid.”

“More doctors?” Marshall cast another glance at Sid. A shockingly thin body was visible under the bedsheets. Who’d have believed that a few short days earlier, this boy had looked healthy, frankly even fat?

“Competent specialists,” Adams replied evasively. He changed the subject. “How are you two doing? Were you able to recuperate?”

“Yes.” Marshall only had to think about it and he felt the pain in his calf again. The gunshot wound he’d sustained at the shelter had been given excellent treatment. Still, the memory of that moment, when something had exploded into his leg and he’d collapsed, powerless, just wouldn’t fade.

“And you, girl?”

“I’m used to worse.” Sue’s words rang true, as did the way she said them, and for good reason.

“Fantastic.” Adams stretched and yawned. His noticeably hunched back stood out even more than usual. “Then we had better take care of Sid.”

As if he’d heard his name, the boy awoke with a start. He heaved himself onto his forearms, stared past Marshall uncomprehendingly and stammered, “No, Elmer. You can’t do that. Mamasita will find us for sure, and then...”

He fell back onto the bed and let out ragged breaths. A nurse—*Where the hell was she hiding up till now?*—came rushing over. After giving Marshall, Sue, and Adams a professional dirty look, she saw to her patient.

The old man stayed remarkably quiet. He stood, respectively making space for the nurse, and said, “Don’t you worry. It’s not the first time today that Sid has sat up in a fright. He dreams. Hallucinates. Did he do that before, John?”

“He was always very anxious and...unstable. But talking in his sleep is new as far as Iknow.”

“Was there an Elmer at your shelter?” Adams asked as the nurse carried out her duties, just as she had undoubtedly done several times over the last few hours. Sid suddenly grew more peaceful. He closed his eyes. His breathing became more regular and his body

relaxed.

“No. I’ve never heard that name before.”

“Sid mentions him in his waking dreams. Again and again. It seems to be an important figure in his life. Before that, he only talked about Clifford Monterny, as you know.”

“Then it’s either a fever dream, or Elmer’s someone else from his life before the shelter. One of his tormentors.” And what *that* meant, John Marshall didn’t even want to think about. Sid had been deeply traumatized when Marshall had picked him up off the street. “Sid was scared to death of a guy who wanted to catch him,” he reflected. “He wasn’t the only one of my foster kids who was like that. Not by a longshot. Plenty of them projected all their pain, their fear, their longing onto a single person.”

He could feel Sue clenching up beside him. She had a story of her own. All his children had a story.

“Perhaps the one who wanted to catch Sid wasn’t Clifford Monterny at all, but Elmer,” Homer G. Adams suggested. “Or his confusion is so great that he’s mixing up their names. Or his subconscious is giving us hints at great truths that lie behind these individual names.”

“Those are all possibilities.”

Adams’ thoughts were getting too abstract for him. The old man tilted his head and stared blankly at the ceiling, as if he might lose himself in calculations branching out ever further.

Then he came back to reality. “As soon as my professionals arrive, we’ll be able to take care of Sid.” He turned to the nurse and added, “Aoi a bhfuil fáilte roimhe, Rathfionna.”

The woman, whose hair was shaved into an audacious retro punk style, murmured some words that Marshall didn’t understand, then left. She withdrew through a door to the right that he hadn’t noticed until that point.

“Rathfionna is the best in her field,” said Adams the moment she

had left the room, “but dealing with her is rather complicated. She refuses to speak English to me. She belongs to the Gaelinns, and as soon as she realized that I understand Old Irish, at least, she has communicated with me exclusively in her mother tongue. She told me that Sid has stabilized, incidentally.”

Marshall breathed a sigh of relief, even if he hadn’t actually needed this information. He could *feel* that Sid had calmed down.

“Gaelinn.” John had heard the term before. A little over twenty years ago, well-educated men and women, primarily from the areas of Connemara and Donegal in the west of Ireland, had founded a community together that was akin to a sect. SInce then they had been preaching a radical return to their Celtic roots.

“That woman’s weird!” Sue blurted out, expressing exactly what Marshall felt.

“Then you should wait and see my other associates.” A scant smile appeared on Adams’s face. “But don’t worry; you’ll like them. They’re just a bit different. Like you.”

Marshall knew that the man wasn’t trying to insult them. Quite the opposite: the words held awe and respect. Even so, he felt uncomfortable being described as “different.” True, he could sense people’s moods. He could tell what other people were thinking and was able to quickly react to their changing states of mind. Did that sensitivity or empathy really make him something special?

Yes. Because it’s more than just “sensitivity” or “empathy,” John. You hear other people’s thoughts. That’s what’s making you so scared.

Outside, a sound was growing louder. Spinning rotor blades. He looked through the window and saw that two helicopters were landing not far from the cottage settlement. The models looked vaguely familiar to Marshall; Adams had apparently bought them from the inventory of the US Army or Homeland Security. If he’d needed any more proof of this man’s wealth, here it was. Each one of these vehicles cost more than the average human would earn in his or her entire life.

Several people got out. One had dark skin that contrasted visibly with the rest of the group. The others were two Asians, a small child of maybe ten years old, a corpulent giant who lurched forward, and a woman with Caucasian features to whom Marshall took an instant liking.

"My guests," said Adams. "Perfect. Would you excuse me for a while?" He didn't wait for an answer before leaving.

Sue let out a relieved breath. "He scares me, John."

"Why?"

"He acts so...overbearing." Sue searched for words. "I can tell he means well. I'm pretty sure he saved Sid's life, and ours. But everything he says sounds like an order."

"It doesn't just *sound* that way," Marshall conceded.

"He probably only ever deals with people who jump at his every word. I don't like it."

"I have my issues with him too, Sue. But Adams has good intentions. He's helping us. Helping Sid."

"I'm just as grateful to him as you are, but..." She stopped, not knowing how to proceed. Her vocabulary wasn't sufficient to formulate the dislike that had a hold on her. The dislike she felt towards all authorities and almost all adults.

A new voice piped up. "Trust is something that's a struggle to acquire, and that always remains elusive."

Marshall jumped. He turned around, alarmed, and looked Allan D. Mercant in the eye. This was the man who used to work for Homeland Security. The same bureau that represented true power in the US and stood for a fiercely conservative America. Whose distrust of all foreigners and strangers now characterized a country that had once valued freedom as the pinnacle of achievement and all that was good.

"How's he doing?" the man with the conspicuously high

forehead asked, without sparing a single word for the long, awkward pause that had followed his arrival.

"Pretty well."

"Does he still have a fever?"

"Yes."

Sue stepped back to the wall as Mercant drew closer to Sid at her side of the bed.

"He's dying," said Mercant.

Marshall jerked back. "Where do you get off saying something like that?" he shouted at the secret agent.

"Sid's traumatized. Everything agitates him more than it would anyone else. You know how he reacted to the sight of the ruined Camp Specter in Narco County, in the border region of Mexico. He experienced something that tears at him. That poisons his soul. If he comes to in his current state, I wouldn't want to be anywhere near him. He'll go crazy. And you know what he's capable of thanks to his curious gift."

"That's just speculation, Mercant! I've known the kid much longer than you have, and much better. He listens to me. If it looked like a crisis was happening, I could make him see reason."

"Don't lie to yourself, John! Sure, he may trust you more than other grown-ups. But you couldn't keep him from going on his cross-country escapade, bringing you and Sue along with him. He took his best friends hostage. Or do you see it differently?"

John Marshall fell silent, equal parts uncertain, furious, and fearful. This man had an intimidating air about it. He seemed composed, absolutely focused, like the product of a system that had sculpted him precisely and spat him out at the end, not permitting any mistakes.

"Sid's managing," said Sue. It was what *he* should have said. "If *you* had his problems, you ugly, mean old man, you'd have called it

quits a long time ago."

"Sue!"

"You know I'm right, John!"

"Maybe, but we should keep our opinions to ourselves."

"Leave the girl alone." Allan D. Mercant sighed deeply. Suddenly he seemed almost human. "If you only knew how nice a little openness can be when day in, day out you have to be careful not to say a single wrong word. When everything in your life is nothing but deception, illusion, and camouflage."

They fell silent and looked past each other for a while. In front of the cottage settlement, the droning of the helicopters became louder again as they rose into the sky and disappeared into the horizon.

At last, Marshall said, "I think we're all carrying back-breakingly heavy loads."

"That we are," Mercant murmured with a hint of a smile. "You know, Marshall, I have a gift that unsettles me sometimes too. On some occasions, I'm able to strip the facts of all unnecessary embellishments and see the situation before me entirely clearly. This ability helped me again and again in my life. At least, until I figured out that it was leading me astray. That I was aiming for the wrong destination and worshipping false idols."

"Where are you going with this, Mercant?"

"Starting a few days ago, I've had a new perspective on the things around me. One that's crystal clear and shows me the sword that might cut through all the Gordian knots in this world."

"I don't understand."

"It's Perry Rhodan. He's capable of delivering us. He has a goal and vision. He seems to know how to pull us out of this big mess."

Perry Rhodan. His trip to the Moon. The supposed discovery of alien life that was being discussed everywhere. His return to Earth

and landing in the Gobi Desert a week ago. All this was dominating the headlines worldwide. It had also made the fires smoldering in the trouble spots of this world break out into open flames. It had seemingly driven people mad and made apocalyptic horror scenarios feel real in a way they hadn't done in a long time.

"Maybe," Marshall replied quietly, for want of better words.

He heard several people entering the cottage. First came the heavy footsteps of the security guy, who rushed ahead. Next were the self-assured steps of Homer G. Adams. After that came the mixed clattering of people large and small, heavy and light.

Marshall could feel them coming. He sensed their thoughts. Their ideas. Dreams. Fears. They were like clouds that covered the sky all in one go and piled up into a storm. These people—they represented danger!

Or did they?

His breathing quickened and sweat suddenly caked his brow. They were people like him!

Adams walked into the room followed by seven, no, eight others. They all presented a demeanor that suggested a certain degree of self-confidence. And yet, Marshall perceived that this was not genuine. The new arrivals bore scars they were hiding at all costs.

"Mercant," said Adams. "Lovely to see you here too." He nodded in the direction of the sickbed. "We'll need you as soon as we take care of Sid."

The man from Homeland Security furrowed his brow as if he didn't understand, but then immediately afterwards he put on a smooth, impassive face. He was a former secret agent through and through.

We become the masks we wear. That was the thought that flashed through John Marshall's mind. *He'll never be able to switch off that part of himself. He'll always be ruled by fear and distrust.*

"May I introduce you to one of my most important associates?"

asked Homer G. Adams, pointing to the muscular man with dark skin. “Ras Tschubai, who shares a similarity with Sid. Don’t worry, he always looks a tad cross. We’re still working on that friendly smile. Isn’t that right, Ras?”

Tschubai took Adams’s words without any sign of emotion. There was no indication of whether he approved of his employer’s attempt at humor.

“To his left: Wuriu Sengu.”

The Japanese man, slightly on the portly side and equipped with a distinctive gelled spiky hairstyle, gave a precise bow. He showed a thin-lipped smile that exactly matched Marshall’s mental image of a reserved Asian. Wuriu Sengu said a few words in his native tongue that Marshall took as a polite greeting. He bowed as well, though without knowing what to say in return.

“Anne Sloane. Stick close to her, John. I suspect you and her will have a few things in common.”

He nodded—and felt himself blush at the same time. Anne Sloane was the woman he’d taken a liking to the moment he had seen her. She had stood out of this odd troupe in an intriguing way. She was probably around thirty and had dark hair and only sparing makeup. Something about her made Marshall sense that under the conscious self-assurance she put on display, a host of conflicting character traits were hidden—shyness among them.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said quietly.

“You too, John Marshall.”

A handshake. Soft, yet powerful. As if she wanted to pull him over to her. And that voice, that timbre...

Other names followed. Marshall only half listened. He shook hands, made noncommittal remarks, smiled. His thoughts had gotten caught on Anne Sloane.

Adams cleared his throat, signaling that introductions were over. Sue, who had done nothing but wave, positioned herself next to

Marshall as if seeking his protection.

“I don’t want to beat around the bush,” said the old man, slipping into an old, now largely unused accent that may have had its origins in Greater London. “Sid González is truly a boy wonder. His gift is so strong that it’s as if benevolent gods emptied their horns of plenty onto him. But where there is light, there is shadow. That’s a truth of which we have all been made painfully aware.”

There were nods all around. Anne Sloane pressed her lips so tightly together that they turned white.

“Mentally, Sid is not especially stable. We fear for his life. The doctors have done everything in their power—and, as always, that was a great deal of nothing. Now it’s your turn. You must uncover what is going on inside Sid. What is burdening and inhibiting him. There may be secrets lurking in his mind that we must uncover as well.”

“Now, hold on a moment!” Marshall cut in.

Homer G. Adams looked at him, annoyed by the interruption. “Yes?”

“‘Uncover’? What the hell do you mean by that? Are you planning to brainwash Sid or something? To squeeze it out of him? I thought you were flying in specialists who would work on Sid’s psyche and help him find himself again as carefully as possible.”

“That would have been the plan if we had enough time, John.” Adams rested a placating hand on his shoulder.

The touch made him tense up. What was going on here? Was this the moment of truth where Adams would reveal his real face?

“The psyche is the most delicate and valuable instrument we humans possess. Some use it as a weapon; others are trapped by it. All of us here know both sides of the coin. We suffer at the hands of our possibilities, and at the same time we learn to make them blossom ever more. Very special powers sleep within us. They can kill us or elevate us.”

“You’re babbling. I wouldn’t have expected that. Not from you, Adams.” Marshall’s heart was pounding. Had he really said that? Where on earth had he gotten the courage to be so frank?

Homer Gershwin Adams nervously played with a decidedly unassuming ring on his right index finger. Apart from that, nothing suggested that he was irritated.

“You’re right,” he admitted, to Marshall’s surprise. “All this talking around the subject has to have an end. We should call it what it is.” Adams turned around in a circle to give a glance at everyone present, then said, “Each person in this room is gifted. A mutant. We possess abilities that other humans do not. The why and how are not important for now. What matters is that we must join forces to find a way into the world of Sid’s thoughts. By doing this, we can find the origin of his fear. We must do it to save him—to save one of us. Perhaps the enemy Sid fears is real; perhaps he stems from a delusion. As long as we can recognize the problem, we will succeed in developing a suitable treatment.”

“*All* of us are…gifted? Mutants?” John Marshall struggled with these new terms. He took little pleasure in them. And he felt afraid. His feeling of discomfort hadn’t deceived him. The people around him *were* different. Different in a way that he had noticed in himself —and that he didn’t like.

“Indeed we are, John. One and all, we are creatures with very unusual abilities. Sue, as you know, can heal at will. We needn’t spend any time talking about Sid’s gift of teleportation. You can read thoughts. Mercant’s gift and mine are less pronounced; it’s hardly even worth discussing them, but they do exist.” Adams turned to the new arrivals. “Wuriu Sengu can see through solid matter. Ras Tschubai possesses an ability similar to Sid’s. He too can jump from one place to another, albeit over far shorter distances. As for Miss Sloane, in times past she would have been burned at the stake if she’d been seen moving things around her without touching them.”

Was that why Marshall had felt himself so drawn to Anne Sloane? Or was there another reason? A far more personal one?

“In essence, we are members of a freak show, and we are by no means the only ones.” Adams smiled. “Over the last few years, I have taken great efforts to assemble gifted individuals around me. Not to use them for my own personal ends, you understand.”

“Am I really supposed to buy this fairy tale of a purely altruistic mindset?” Marshall interrupted. He felt rage growing inside him. He didn’t *want* to be special. Not now. Not here. This was his own business. It was entirely personal.

“Call it what you want, John,” replied Adams, unruffled. “Every now and then, I have brought my friends into action to achieve specific goals. To earn money and expand my sphere of influence. I admit that freely and honestly. However, I didn’t do it because I wanted to enrich myself.” He lowered his voice, almost whispering now. “I wanted to be prepared. For the arrival of a visionary like Perry Rhodan.”

John Marshall didn’t feel comfortable with the words of this old, hunched, and impossibly powerful man. There was an almost religious reverence in his voice that in no way matched his usual bearing.

“Let’s return to our most pressing issue,” Adams continued. “We’ll attempt an experiment that has already worked with a smaller group.”

“What kind of experiment?”

“We will combine our powers, John. We will make contact with Sid’s mind. Under your guidance.”

“My guidance?” Marshall repeated, baffled. “How’s that supposed to work? What are you expecting from me?”

“Concentrate on your ability to detect other people’s thoughts. Search for Sid’s voice and try to isolate it. We will form a circle and attempt to project all our powers onto you and create a kind of array.” Adams shook his head. “There are hardly any words to describe what people like us are capable of achieving mentally. We shall try it and find out.”

“You know about my reservations,” remarked Ras Tschubai in a booming voice, speaking for the first time. “We have several unknowns. Sue and John are hardly even aware of their powers and are even less able to control them. There’s a risk of creating a feedback loop. Of overwhelming Sid.”

“I know, Ras,” Adams interrupted impatiently. “Some small measure of risk can never be ruled out. But I’m relying on you and Anne to intervene as needed.”

Tschubai’s face was grim. He looked decidedly unconvinced, but even so, he reached for Marshall’s right hand.

“Let me guide you,” he advised. “Cast off all your reservations. Forget your fears, your confusion. The more ready you are to accept the impossible, the better our chances are of creating a successful circle.”

Marshall wanted to pull his hand back. To him, all this felt more like a summoning ritual by some kind of cult than a serious attempt to explore Sid’s psyche. And yet...in the tapestry of thoughts that surrounded him, he could detect almost exclusively positive resonances.

He marveled at Homer G. Adams’s prudence. There was no way he’d brought them to this godforsaken place just to keep them safe from a possible pursuer. Here, they were completely uninfluenced by anyone else, by normal people.

Strange. How quickly he had accepted being different after all. How quickly he had gotten his bearings in the role of a gifted person. Was this the place he’d been searching for in vain for so long? That had turned him from a stockbroker serving the god Mammon with abandon into a foster father to severely struggling youths before finally ending up here?

He felt a small, delicate hand gently touching his left. The touch was electrifying; it was full of barely subdued power.

“Have faith, John,” said Anne Sloane. She looked at him for a

moment. “We’ll make Sid better. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” he echoed. All at once, his worries were swept aside. What was it about this woman that absorbed him so much, and so quickly?

Sid groaned, as if he could sense that everyone’s interest was focused on him.

Sue took Ras Tschubai’s hand, Mercant grasped Wuriu Sengu’s right, and Adams put his hands on the shoulders of the two Asians. All of them stood there, apparently lost in thought, as if they were waiting for something specific.

For what, though?

There were faint flashes that obfuscated his view of reality. They laid themselves over his perception and made him perceive something *entirely different*. A world beyond the material one. A universe of terrifying size and depth.

They’re waiting for me! Marshall was suddenly aware. *They want me to take over and lead them! I’m the only one who can read Sid’s thoughts, so I’m the focus of all their efforts.*

There were delicate cotton wool clouds, only visible to him, that could clearly be ascribed to Sue. They remained amorphous and drifted steadily, while Adams’s powers arrived with far more fanfare. *Like a fanfare played on miniature instruments; his powers don’t add up to much.*

Ras Tschubai’s mind spilled over him like a sluggish wave, while Mercant drove at him with knife thrusts. Anne Sloane was sand. A steady trickle of sun-warmed sand; the kind you’d see in a beautiful vacation paradise and really know you were on vacation.

So many influences. So many different ways of communicating. So much potential...

And it all belonged to him. Marshall just had to find a way to mold the raw masses of mental power into a suitable form and use it to penetrate the world of Sid’s thoughts.

Where was Sid, anyway?

He was outside of the circle, presenting himself as a wriggling worm all too aware of how small and helpless he was.

Marshall closed his eyes and sought out that mind. All of a sudden, everything worked as if by clockwork. Had he really lived another life once? Was he like Adams, a man who just needed to wait for a messiah to draw out the best in himself?

He saw Sid's mind. It was like a mesh of gauze-like scraps, the thoughts seemingly fragmented and disarrayed beyond repair. Where the hell was he supposed to start? How could he free Sid's personality and find out what was causing the boy so much grief?

Accept the impossible, Ras Tschubai had told him.

Marshall got to work. He created mental sewing needles, dreamed up storage compartments, concocted a categorization system. He had all the ideas he needed, born out of pure instinct; he knew what he had to do and how to do it. And if he doubted himself even for a moment, he had a circle of supporters ready for battle, there to give him tips or simply to resharpen his spiritual tools.

How much time had passed in reality since he had begun to dig through Sid's buried memories? Should he release himself from the mental network and give in to his curiosity, he wondered?

He decided against it. He was pretty sure the searching still to come would demand all his strength. He was dealing with the mindscape of a teenager who was fighting back against the intrusion with every tool he had—and Marshall couldn't blame Sid for his panic. Who would want to give up that last most intimate refuge of freedom?

It's me! thought Marshall as intensively and warmly as he could. But Sid did not react. He continued to wander. Kept running from the invisible enemy whose memory he had conjured up again in Narco County after such a long time. Who just wouldn't leave him alone even after all these years.

John Marshall followed, going deeper and deeper into the chasms of a truly injured soul. To get to know an adversary who had once been Sid's friend.

3.

At the Garden Fence

July 8, 2036

Silence reigned. The Chinese military was giving them a few hours of quiet contemplation. Not for humanitarian reasons, for sure. Bai Jun, the general, was expecting something from them. Clearly, he wanted Rhodan to take this time to be conscious of his own situation and take stock of it. It was a sign to say: “See here, you little foreign spaceman! We, the People’s Army of China, are the ones in control. Your dreams are nothing but that. Even in the face of your superior technology, we will prevail. Nothing will stop us from extinguishing the last, miserable remains of your fantasies. When we’re done with you, there’ll be no trace of you left.”

“You’re daydreaming,” said Bull.

“I’m deliberating,” Rhodan replied.

“Stop lying to me, man. You know I can see right through it. We know each other too well.”

They were silent for a little while. Then Rhodan asked his question. “What now?”

“What are you asking me for?”

“Our cause is as good as lost.”

“Is that doubt I hear in the voice of the ever-confident Perry Rhodan?”

“The *Aetron*’s been destroyed. Thora is dead. We’ve lost almost every piece of equipment the Arkonides gave us.”

“But Crest is still alive! He promised he’d support us.”

“Where *is* Crest? Where’s Manoli? They should have come back

ages ago."

"Searching for a cure to Crest's illness and for this Dr. Haggard took more time than we thought, I guess."

This was just one of the main uncertainties in their plans. They didn't know what had happened to the elderly Arkonide and the *Stardust*'s doctor.

"Do you want to give up?" Bull added.

"The idea has occurred to me."

"You'd be sentencing us both to death. China doesn't exactly handle people like us with kid gloves."

People like us. What a strangely meaningless euphemism for dreamers and fools who believed they could keep the world's great powers at bay.

"There's no way back," Bull asserted. "If we give ourselves up to the Chinese, we, along with Nyssen, Deringhouse, Baturin, and Morosova, would be the stars of a trial encompassing the three most powerful nations. The consequences would be disastrous. No side would want to lose face, and we'd all be one step closer to a world war and a doomsday scenario. Maybe the last one ever, if you know what I mean." Bull took a deep breath and puffed out his cheeks. "We have to keep going. Come what may."

"By what means? With what vision?"

"Look outside, Perry! How many people are waiting outside of the energy dome begging to be let in? Ten thousand? Fifty thousand? More? They've come here and suffered all kinds of hardships to be part of your vision. Are you trying to tell me you don't believe your own words anymore?"

Rhodan pondered in silence. He wavered, unsure of himself. "It's all turned out to be far more complicated than I expected," he confessed.

"For God's sake, Perry!" Bull blustered. "When are you going to

finally get your ass in gear and officially welcome our guests as citizens of Terrania? You always did throw the most miserable parties on the Nevada Fields compound. It's time to prove you can do better! I want us to get this damn city off the ground. For you to make your dream, *our* dream a reality. So we can rest our weary bones inside in ten or twenty years." Quietly, he added, "If you don't believe in your own vision, who else is supposed to?"

Rhodan listened, partly shocked by the intensity in Bull's voice and partly ashamed of doubting himself.

"You're the master of the motivational speech," he said at last. Then, "Thanks! I needed that kick in the ass."

Bull smirked and clapped him on the shoulder. "I'll have one ready any time you need it."

Rhodan took a breath. The refreshing breeze carried the scent of charred cables with it. "Better introduce me to our guests, then."

It was time for a stroll. Rhodan didn't know what prompted him to walk along the boundaries of the energy shield and seek out a very specific spot, but he did it nonetheless.

A few hundred meters away, on the other side of the "fence," he saw a lone figure standing. When the man caught sight of Rhodan, he started moving and approached along the lightly sloping trail, arriving at the place where they'd already met several times.

"How's it going?" asked General Bai Jun as soon as they were within speaking distance.

"Fine," Rhodan replied monosyllabically.

"I've been worried about you."

"You have? Before or after you ordered the *Stardust* shot down?"

"I opened fire on a military target," the general said with a soft voice, "but not at a specific person."

“That’s a cynical and two-faced attitude.”

“It’s coherent with the military doctrine of the great Chinese people. *Destroy the enemy—and have compassion for the people.*

Rhodan fell silent. It was futile to level accusations at Bai Jun. Every commander in the world would have done the same thing under the circumstances.

“In your situation, I’d be thinking about the best way to get out of this mess.”

“Would you now?” Rhodan folded his arms in front of his chest.

“China is known for its generosity,” Bai Jun insisted. “It rewards those who can be persuaded by the respectability of its motives. My homeland can prove itself exceedingly magnanimous and would welcome men like you with open arms.”

“What are you getting at?”

“These days, ideology is nothing but a buzzword. I say that without any cynicism; it is simply the truth. Ultimately, it makes no difference who wins the battle for mastery of the world. Whether it is the Great Russians, you Americans, or my people, all that matters is that it *does* happen. The pressure on the leaders is gradually becoming too great. Someone will lose their nerve and make a wrong decision. Regardless of where— the bunkers of Kamchatka, the oh-so-secretive control centers under the Nevada Desert, a supposed trading house in some city of Szechuan province, or in some other place.”

“General, where are you going with this?”

The man, half Uighur and half Han Chinese, was clearly irritated by the interruption but refrained from openly expressing it.

“As we know from the history books, there have been three great crises since the end of the Second World War that could have led to armageddon: 1961, 1983, and 2026.”

The Bay of Pigs Invasion. Kennedy and Khrushchev.

Then the downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007. The Russians' fear of an American first strike under the leadership of President Regan. In the early fall of 1983, a single person, Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov, had prevented the launch of nuclear missiles by disobeying his superior officer's orders.

And then the *Osterman incident.* Rhodan could remember it well. A conflict between the Russians and Chinese had been settled at the last second under mysterious circumstances that had never been explained.

"There are no safeguards against people's insanity," said Bai Jun. "Despite a seemingly all-encompassing data network, all the security provisions our specialists can arrange, and all our intelligence, we are ultimately still beings formed in the distant past. When their enemies drew near, our forefathers lifted up rocks and cried out at the top of their lungs. They lashed out as soon as they believed someone wanted to invade their territory." Bai Jun squinted in the sunlight. "That's how we were and still are."

"And now you think it's China's prerogative to correct these ongoing errors in the writing of history. By letting your general secretary and his cadre comrades raise themselves up above other world ideologies and claim to represent the bastion of all wisdom."

"Is this idea so wrong, Perry Rhodan? Don't you want the same? You're trying to unify mankind, and so are we."

"To be frank, I'm not sure about your choice of methods. Modern Chinese history is full of reports of repression, suppressed revolts, and genocide against minorities. As an Uighur by birth, how do you feel about the topics of justice and equality of opportunity?"

"You're speaking to a member of the People's Army, not an Uighur." Bai Jun pressed his lips together tightly.

"Can I tell you something, General? You're trying to be persuasive. You're trying to say and do the right thing. But you're standing on the wrong side."

The highly decorated soldier laughed unexpectedly. "And where,

pray tell, should I be standing? On the payroll of Homeland Security, perhaps, sworn in by an American president whose moral integrity is no better than a croque dealer's? Or in Red Square, festooned with metal trinkets that mark me out as a *hero of Great Russia*?"

"Of course not, Bai Jun. You should be standing here. On the other side of this shield. You should be helping me figure out what we can do better and how."

The general stopped and thought for a moment before bursting into raucous laughter. "You are a delight, Rhodan! We've shot most of your resources out from under your bottoms, and still you talk of building this pathetic fantasy called Terrania."

"That's the long and short of it."

"Your ship has been destroyed. The Arkonide ship as well, so I've heard. You're surrounded with no room left to maneuver. The proverbial wreckage is lying all around you."

"We have more tricks up our sleeve, General."

"Oh, really? I'm a keen gambler, you know. I can tell when someone's bluffing. When they have no more left to lose."

"You're forgetting about Crest."

"The old Arkonide; true. We haven't seen him for quite a while now. The recon drones keeping watch over your defensive shield report that they haven't seen him on the ground for days. Is he under the ground, perhaps? Could he even be in a coffin?"

"He couldn't be better; thank you for your concern. I'll send him your best wishes."

"Maybe he'd even want to accompany you on your next walk over here?"

"Maybe."

There was a long pause. Rhodan spent it gathering his strength

and new arguments to continue their verbal shadow boxing, and he suspected Bai Jun was doing the same.

"I'll tell you one thing, General. It's honestly not going all that well for us. We've expended a good portion of our resources. We've lost our advantage. But the technology isn't what matters. That can all be replaced."

"Keep going."

"The one and only thing that counts is people. As you say, humans are built to bash each other's skulls in when asserting our territory." Rhodan closed his eyes. "But there's something completely different there too. For want of a better phrase, I'll call it *the good in us*. All the idealism we're capable of mustering. Optimism. Selflessness. Grand ideas. Art. Creative drive. Joy and enthusiasm. Skills we cultivate when we need them, like the power of persuasion. We carry all of these inside ourselves. And I *know* that all we need is the tiniest impulse to make trifles like place of origin, skin color, ideological standpoints, and social differences look totally irrelevant. To bring about a paradigm shift, all that's needed is the right symbol."

"And *you* want to be that symbol, Rhodan? Don't make a fool of yourself! You've achieved something great, and I must admit that I find some of your ideas intriguing. But you are still just a man, not a symbol."

"I never said it would be me." Perry Rhodan gestured behind him with one hand. "It's the city. The city is our legitimation! In the not-too-distant future, it will be home to everything I just told you about. It'll be a city the likes of which there has never been in the history of mankind."

"The city, then," Bai Jun echoed reflectively. "A monument. The hope of a better tomorrow given form."

"And it will lead us away from here. To meet all the other civilizations out there in space."

"I have to ask where you get all your enthusiasm, Rhodan."

“You’ll find the answer not far from here. In the camps full of all those people who are waiting to be allowed to move into Terrania. *They’re* the ones who give me strength.”

“Oh, yes, all the fools.” Bai Jun suddenly looked contemplative. Or perhaps sad?

“The Gobi is a terrible environment for people without food, water, or shelter,” he said in a sober voice. “Soon there’ll be close to a hundred thousand of them. So far I’ve provided for them from our army supplies, arranging for them to be fed and even given medical attention as needed. But I think the time for charity is over. You tell me that your followers are what give you the strength to carry on? Then I would recommend that in the future, you see to the well-being of these people. From now on, they belong to you, Perry Rhodan.” He nodded curtly. “I wish you a lovely and successful day. May your dreams come true.”

General Bai Jun stuck the western-manufactured pistol back into its holster, turned around, and left.

4.

In Poverty

The Past

Paco was doing what he always did: playing the victim. He was rolling around on the ground, his mouth covered in foam that he'd produced with a mixture of soap scraps, dirty rain water, and a few grains of sherbet.

"He's so damn good!" Manos whispered admiringly. "Watch! Even the old women from the market are starting to look."

That was neither good nor bad, Chico knew. The more people gathered around Paco, the better their chances were of cleaning up. On the other hand, they couldn't forget that the market women had a good eye for detail. They might recognize the kids and give the game away. If Paco wasn't playing his role so well, the women would have remained indifferent and let the kids do as they liked.

"Turistas!" said Xiomara. She grinned. "Over there. Pale as your jersey, Chico. A woman with blonde hair and jewels around her neck, and a man with mirrored sunglasses. They look as dumb as castrated donkeys."

Chico saw the couple. Their sunburned faces were gleaming with sweat. In a few minutes, the woman's makeup would be running, and the man would be gazing across the area like an idiot as he realized he should never have set foot in Barrio San Sebastian.

"Let's go!" Manos ordered.

"Wait! Did Gioconda give the signal?"

"Of course! Weren't you looking? Come on!"

Manos pulled Chico behind him towards the circle that had clustered around Paco. There was pushing and shoving. A fat woman called out for a doctor, her voice cracking. Men competed

to offer suggestions for helping the boy. This was when Paco would start to tremble all over and, if necessary, wet his tattered pants.

Chico stumbled. He had tripped on one of the many fissures in the pavement. He collided with the back of a man, shoving him in Paco's direction.

The man turned around. He had an unkempt beard and bloodshot eyes. "Dammit, cretino! Watch where you're going!"

Chico murmured an apology and drew back in fear. He'd messed up—again! Other adults turned and looked at him. Some shook their heads, annoyed, while others ranted about the street rats who made the barrio so dangerous.

His heart pounding, Chico stood there, unexpectedly the center of attention at the very moment his friends were about to get to work.

"He's peeing his pants!" cried a woman with a mix of revulsion, fear, and nosy curiosity in her voice.

At last, they were focused on Paco again! The bearded man flung one last insult at him, then turned back around. Various looks of anger were directed at Chico. Manos, Xiomara, Gioconda, Paco, and Ruben wouldn't let him share in the loot today. His ineptitude had put them in danger and wasted valuable time.

Chico slowly drew back. He wouldn't be able to help his friends anymore. He'd been noticed. The adults knew that he was there now. If everything had gone as planned, all they'd felt was the weak pushing and shoving of a faceless child and not paid it any further attention.

Gioconda knuckled down. She was by far the smoothest of their group. With swift hands, she felt along pant legs, cut tiny holes in the material, and pulled out coins and crumpled bills. Paco was still yelling.

Chico looked around. More people were rushing over, attracted as if by a magnet. The cluster grew larger and larger. Soon it looked

like fifty men and women had amassed.

Two minutes. By now, every girl and boy in the group had gotten some spoils. Time was almost up. But where was Carlita?

There she was. She shrieked, wringing her hands in the air. “Paco, my precious!” she cried. “Where are you? Mama will be here soon! I’ll help you!” She heedlessly shoved her way through the crowd. Everyone made space for the sick boy’s (purported) mother.

Chico couldn’t see what was happening, but he must have witnessed this performance at least a dozen times by now. Carlita would wail and curse and lament, throw herself over the body of little Paco, and then ask for a strong man to quickly carry him to their home, where she had the medicine the boy needed. She’d find some idiot to help, or rather, she would pick one out. She had an eye for idiots. The man would lift Paco up and rush him away from the crowd, far enough that no one was following them anymore, into the backyard of a ruined tenement. What happened after that at Carlita’s discretion. She had been attractive once, and even now the swing of her hips was capable of convincing some fools that she wanted to thank them for Paco’s sudden, miraculous recovery. The poor guy, no doubt married, would pay dearly to ensure Carlita didn’t say anything about this slip-up to the betrayed wife.

It always happened along those lines. Chico didn’t understand much about what went on in the bedchambers. He was too young for that. But it seemed to be fun and also caused heartache at the same time.

Carlita’s victim was just setting out now, Paco soaking wet in his arms, Carlita running after him with her skirt blowing in the wind. Manos whistled; their work was done. They had to vanish as quickly as possible before the onlookers came to their senses and realized they’d been relieved of their hard-earned cash.

“Come on!” cried Xiomara as she scurried past him. She held a shiny necklace in her hand. The blonde woman had previously been wearing it around her neck.

Chico followed her into the labyrinth of squalid buildings and

ruins that hadn't been rebuilt after the big earthquake. Through stinking puddles, past miserable tent cities, along a small trail, over the debris hills they knew like the backs of their hands, and then down to the lago. Into the world of *La Chureca*, the giant field where the trash from the vast city was deposited.

Their current hideout was here. Cardboard boxes had been piled on top of one another and strengthened with wooden beams. Broken tiles had been laid out, creating a relatively even floor. Beneath it was a trash heap probably several meters high.

Chico was the last to make it back, as always. His friends were already sitting there, crowded together and catching their breath with wide eyes and hearts beating loudly.

"It went well today," said Manos.

"Yeah, it went well again," they all echoed, as per usual.

Gioconda, who was eleven years old already and could only conceal her budding breasts with some difficulty, let out a girlish giggle. "Show me what you got from the turista!" she demanded of Xiomara.

"Later!" the younger girl replied. "First, let's see how we did this time."

Four children laid out their spoils in the middle of the floor. No one spared a single glance for Chico. They were mad at him. Naturally.

"Over two hundred pesos!" Manos proclaimed proudly after a while. He'd learned reading, writing, and arithmetic. He was their unofficial leader, and Chico was already afraid of the moment the twelve-year-old would leave them. That he *would* leave them was as certain as "amen" at the end of a prayer. Local members of the *Mara* already had an eye on the skillful, intelligent boy.

Chico didn't understand everything that went on with the Mara. But it wasn't good. They worked with poison; they forced women to do things they didn't want to do. They made children into addicts

so they could get other people addicted. They taught their members how to use knives—and guns.

“It’s a lot of money,” said Manos reverently. “We’ll have cash for three days now. We can get new underpants for Paco, pay Carlita, and even buy a little equipment.”

Equipment! What a magical word. They’d be able to restock their knife arsenal, maybe buy a third communal blanket, some clean things. Shoes. Something to deal with the lice.

Candy.

Tears flooded Chico’s eyes. “I’m sorry!” he cried. “I didn’t mean for people to notice me.”

“You should be sorry!” Manos interjected rudely. “They almost got wise to us. I should beat the hell out of you.” The large boy acted as though he was thinking it over. “But I won’t,” he said in a generous tone. “You have one last chance. One more screw-up like that and you’re out.”

Alone. Unprotected. Without any warmth or the modicum of affection they showed one another. Chico wouldn’t survive a week if no one helped him.

“Thanks!” he said, painstakingly holding back his tears.

“You’re not getting any share in the loot,” said Manos coolly. “And nothing to eat today. Go get us some water. Now.”

“Okay.” Chico got up—and almost tripped on one of the loose tiles. He left the shack as quickly as he could.

He’d been given one last chance. Manos was a good friend and leader.

During the night, Xiomara and Gioconda had almost scratched each other’s eyes out over the gold necklace. Xiomara, whom he liked so much, who let him go under her covers sometimes when he was afraid, had a swollen face. She also didn’t smell as good as she

usually did.

"*Tia roja* is visiting you," said Paco, giggling. He had rejoined them at some point during the evening. "Aunt Flo. She's bleeding. Down there, where only women bleed."

All the older kids laughed, including Gioconda. Xiomara looked ready to explode with rage, but she controlled herself.

Manos took the necklace out of his pocket. He'd taken it after the two girls had calmed down. "I'm selling this. I know someone who'll give me a good price for it."

Pride glimmered in his eyes—and curiosity. Chico thought he knew who this 'someone' was. They belonged to the Mara for sure. Manos was taking another step towards his inevitable future.

"Don't do it," he said quietly.

"Huh?"

"Sell it to old Garrincha instead. He'll buy it for sure, and he always pays well."

"Bullshit!" Manos snarled at him. "He cheats us. We'd get three hundred pesos at best for some jewelry that's worth at least three times that."

"Three times?" marveled Ruben, who rarely spoke. "That's nearly two thousand pesos!"

"Nine hundred," Manos corrected proudly before commanding, "Let's go! I'm meeting my friend at the *Monument Simon Bolivar*."

"But that's half an hour's walk from here!" Paco complained. "We shouldn't go too far out of our territory."

"We'll all go together. Or do you want to stay here? Alone?"

Again this word that was more terrifying than any other: *alone*. Being together meant protection. It meant sound sleep, friendship, warmth, and conversation. These were all things that no one could

offer them otherwise.

“I’m coming with,” replied Paco, disgruntled.

He was the next one who would steal away from the group and forge a new path. Chico could feel it.

“Let’s get moving!” Manos ordered. He was the first one to crawl through the hole leading out of the shack.

They all scurried behind him. They crossed over huge trash mountains whose stink had been clinging to them for so long that Chico only noticed it when the wind from the *laguna* wafted in. Seagulls squawked above them, and the vicious hissing of rats could be heard from one of the many hollows. They avoided them as much as possible; it was best not to tangle with the creatures. They made you sick too.

The monument came into view. Manos told them to wait in the shadow of a tower of canisters that some pranksters had built. It offered a little shade in the increasingly humid heat.

Their leader came back after half an hour or so. Grinning, he pointed at his bulging shirt. “Seven hundred pesos!” he called to them. “You’ve never seen so much money in all your life.” He pulled out one crumpled bill and held it up for everyone to see.

Chico gazed at it, astounded. It had a three-digit number next to the head of a man with a strange, wavy hairstyle. *Three digits!* He could never have imagined it.

“Didn’t you say you’d get at least nine hundred?” asked Paco suspiciously.

“I didn’t just get money, but a great tip besides. My friend told me somewhere there’s good loot for the taking today. A *casa* not far from here. Its owners are rich moneybags who are out of the country for a while. There’s only one guard, and he’s stone cold drunk from ten o’clock every night.”

“I thought we didn’t have to work for the next few days?” Paco remained stubborn and suspicious.

“It’s good info, and it’ll give us *a whole month* without work! My friend promised to let me take every last bit of the spoils for a fantastic price. Imagine. Thirty whole days of lazing about.” His voice took on an awed tone. “We could even go on a day out to the *feria*.”

They all sighed and grew misty-eyed. The feria was an amusement center in Barrio El Boer. In the middle stood a brightly lit Ferris wheel that everyone crowded around. There were sideshows, a small theater stage, and countless machines that shone and made noise. Then there was the toy maker in his tiny 3D workshop. For a small fee, he made figures from little white balls of plastic that he melted down before the children’s eyes. A narrow jet sprayed the liquid into a mold, layer by layer, and after a few minutes you were given a hand-sized toy that still felt slightly warm.

Chico had a very vague memory of the feria. Someone had taken them there a few years ago. It hadn’t been his parents. He didn’t know who his parents were. Perhaps one of the old mother hens from the orphanage he’d fled some time ago.

“Let’s do it!” said Paco. “But Manos, if you’ve lied to us and we don’t find enough loot, you can forget all about us in the future.”

They were pretty brazen words. The two tall boys stood facing each other, eye to eye, sizing each other up. Like gamecocks.

“After tonight, we’ll be filthy rich,” Manos insisted, ending the silent duel. “Time to get going! We have to get a good look at the casa before we break in.”

Darkness fell over Managua. Countless lights glowed all around. At night, you could almost believe the city was beautiful. In reality, it was a giant garbage dump with a handful of bright spots.

Before the earthquake, Chico had been told, the city had been safe and attractive. Everyone had had enough to eat, the water had been clean, and the children had all gone to the school.

“Go!” Manos whispered to them. “Be quiet, Chico, and don’t screw up again!”

He nodded and followed after his friends. He was more nervous than he’d ever been. It was one thing to take a little cash from idiots on the street; it was another thing to break into a house in an area they hardly knew.

Before dark, Manos had worked out their way over the garden wall. At the northeastern corner, just a few meters from the brickwork, stood a pile of trash tall enough that you could climb up it and jump to the top of the wall.

Gioconda and Xiomara went first. Being fairly light, they managed it with no issues. Chico went next; he pushed himself off, threw himself over, and clawed at the crumbling plaster. The girls grabbed him and pulled him up. The other boys followed. It all occurred in total silence.

“Where’s the old night watchman?” asked Manos.

“By the south wall. He’s doing his rounds right now. He’s staggering.” Ruben had remarkably good eyes.

They jumped to the ground two and a half meters below. Chico rolled along the soft grass and hurried after his friends, who had a head start on him again.

How did they do it? Why were they always faster than he was?

He smelled fruit. Mangos. And flowers whose petals were already closed but still gave off a distinctive scent. There were bushes, shrubs, and trees, all well groomed. Madroños, pinuelas, ceibas, and royal palms.

They were at the front of the house. There was a colonnade and plaster that was wet and slowly crumbling. Something disappeared into the tall grass. Possibly a cat that had returned to the wild; there were thousands of them across the city, making large parts of it more dangerous after dark.

The windows. Paco got on Manos’s shoulders and tried to open

them one after another. The sixth one tilted slightly inwards. The rest was routine; a loop of wire was enough to release the window's latch in a few seconds.

"The guard's coming back!" said Ruben. "Hurry up!"

One after another, they slipped into the house. They pulled up Manos last of all. The window had only barely closed when a flashlight's beam swept across the house.

No one said a word. They all knew how close it had been. But a few tense moments were all part of the job.

They caught their breath for a moment. When the light moved on—and the guard along with it—they advanced deeper into the house.

Chico looked around in amazement. He saw strange statues made of wood and stone, ugly forms with ugly grimaces that stood in almost every corner.

"The gold and jewels are in the basement," said Manos. "Hidden in a hole in a concrete pillar. Follow me!" He pulled something out of his pocket, hardly recognizable in the dim light, and put it in his mouth.

Corazon. Manos took it because it made you happy. Just like almost all the older boys and girls. But why here, why now? Corazon didn't just make you happy; it also made you throw caution to the wind!

They found the entrance to the basement. *What would it be like, living in a house like this?* Chico wondered. *To sleep in a bed, to be able to shower, to always be able to eat whenever you wanted?*

They climbed down into the darkness via steps that were slippery and far too steep. It smelled musty. The owner had chosen a good hiding place for the valuables but had been careless nonetheless. Someone must have let it slip. Maybe the owner's wife, maybe a housemaid who had stuck her nose where it didn't belong.

"Well done!" Manos whispered as soon as they'd reached the

landing. It sounded like a sigh. “My friend told me the guard never comes down here. That means we have all night to get the job done. We’ll empty the stash and wait for the drunkard to finish his next walk through the building. While he’s walking outside or even taking a little nap, we’ll make ourselves scarce. Got it?”

“Got it,” they echoed in unison. Manos had already explained what to do and how to behave several times today.

They felt their way through the darkness. A sizzling sound was accompanied by the tiny flame of a match. Ruben lit a candle, revealing the broad grin on his face. They couldn’t afford a flashlight. At least, they never could before. Maybe everything would be different after tonight.

Manos brought out another candle, as did they all. One after another, they lit them and made a small island of light. Around them lay tools; boxes stuffed haphazardly full of clothes; a junk bin filled with old electronics. Cell phones, computer components, pods that had broken screens but might have been functional otherwise. These things alone were worth a small fortune!

“The stash should be over to the left,” Manos asserted.

Why were they whispering? There was no reason for it. They were safe. They had nothing to fear.

They walked around a workbench and past rusty garden furniture. A spiderweb got caught in Chico’s face; disgusted, he pulled the threads away.

“There’s the pillar.” Manos pointed triumphantly at a concrete column maybe half as wide as Chico was tall. Old carpets were draped around it, and on one side hung a strange disc divided into twenty segments. Beside it lay a few darts with metal points.

“Under the disc,” said Manos. “Help me out, guys.”

Light flared out. *Real* light. Blinded, Chico shut his eyes. He staggered, struggling to maintain balance. Panic rose up in him. Something had gone horribly, horribly wrong!

“Put your dirty little hands where I can see them!” called a man with a deep voice from somewhere. “Not another sound, or you’ll get a bullet in you!”

“They’re just kids, Jefe,” said another. “They’re not the Mara members we were expecting. None of them are older than ten or twelve.”

“So? Thievery is thievery!”

“Run for it!” cried Manos.

Chico opened his eyes. Squinting, he saw their leader make for the disc, quick as lightning. He ripped it from its hook and flung it in the direction of the light source, a ceiling lamp. It smashed, plunging them into darkness again. The conical beams of several flashlights soon made up for it.

Chico grasped the situation with the reflexes one had to pick up on the streets of Managua if one wanted to survive. He heard other sandaled feet clattering on the floor, and one in hobnailed boots. They were easy to tell apart.

Manos hurried towards the staircase. A police officer put himself in the way; Manos evaded him with an unbelievably swift motion. Gioconda followed him. She too managed to dodge the corpulent man’s arms. Chico went to follow them, but he quickly saw that a colleague had joined the fat officer, gripping a huge gun in his hands. The beams of light exposed a face that appeared both dazed and irate all at once.

The men forced Chico back towards the workbench. He could again see the pillar with its supposed bounty of treasure. In the hole behind the disc there was...nothing.

That didn’t matter anymore. He had to get out of this trap. Somehow, he had to make it past the men, five or six of them, who were blocking his path to the staircase.

Someone screamed. A girl. Xiomara. One of the officers had forced her into a corner. He reached for her, dodged her fingernails,

grabbed at her again.

“I have her!” he cried triumphantly, wrapping an arm around her throat. Xiomara’s screams faded into a choking sound.

A screech resounded; it could have been a girl’s, but it belonged to Paco. He’d been caught as well. What did these guys want from them? They weren’t important. They were just kids trying to survive any way they could!

It was all Manos’s fault! He made this mission sound so juicy. If not for him, they’d have stuck to the marketplaces and dark alleys of Barrio San Sebastian!

Someone reached for Chico; he dodged. He felt wet fingers stroke against his arms. He crawled under the workbench, looking for somewhere to hide. A hole or corner big enough for him to fit through but too small for the police officers to crawl in after him.

More spiderwebs. Nails. A thumbtack that pierced his skin. Chico didn’t care. He could think about pain later. There were some partly rusted sheets of metal layered closely together. Could he squeeze behind them?

“Get out of there, rat!” someone called behind him. Suddenly, a beam of light was shining right on Chico. “I swear to God, I’ll shoot if you don’t come back here right this instant.”

An empty threat, surely. A police officer would never shoot him. He was only eight, maybe nine years old!

“Now!”

Something clicked. Metal struck against metal. It turned out there was a little space behind the rusted sheets. He could hide here, and then as soon as the police officer got up again, clamber to the left or right. There *had* to be a way out somewhere! And he wasn’t even worth chasing!

There was a bang. It was so loud, so intense, that Chico could feel the floor quaking. It almost deafened him. The officer had shot! At him!

Chico didn't know what to do. Yes, he *was* a rat. A cornered one.

"Leave me alone!" he cried, thrashing about wildly like a baby. "All of you, get away from me! Go!"

And they obliged him.

Smelling fresh air, Chico stared up at a low-hanging royal palm. Stars glimmered between the wide, frayed leaves. Wonderful silence surrounded him.

He stopped shouting and gasped for breath. His heart pounded like crazy, and a strange taste filled his mouth. He had bitten his tongue.

What had happened? Where was he?

Looking around, he was in the casa's front yard, a few meters away from the building itself. If he really listened closely, he could hear yelling.

There were narrow windows at ground level. Did they lead to the basement he'd been in? Had he somehow made it out through those and forgotten? But if so, why in Saint Bridget's name were the windows all closed? What had happened to his friends? His family?

A face appeared behind one of the glass panes, faint and barely recognizable behind the layer of dust. It was Xiomara. She saw him. She called something to him. Her fingers scratched against the glass. She shook her head, panic-stricken.

Something reached for her and grabbed her small head of curly hair, squeezing it like a vice. The face of one of the officers approached hers. The man wore an evil smile. His eyes held a gleam that Chico had seen many times before. When men and women came together. When men wanted to inflict pain upon women.

Xiomara fought back. She bit into one of the fat fingers, and for a moment the policeman drew back—only to immediately grab her again and slam her head against the glass. Once, twice. Blood

appeared on her forehead. Xiomara dropped her resistance. She just stared straight ahead. At him. She looked deeply into Chico's eyes. She was trying to tell him something. In his heart, he sensed that it was "Please."

"Please help me."

He was a child. He should never have seen or experienced anything like this. An adult might have seized the opportunity to turn tail and run, but Chico couldn't do that. Life had taught him that there was no justice, and certainly no right to happiness, but he was still too young to accept this as cast-iron fact.

He had to do something. Had to help Xiomara. So, with all his strength, he wished he were back in the basement.

And then he was.

Chico took in the sudden darkness and the cones of light dancing up and down around him. He ran to the concrete pillar and fumbled around for the strange darts. He soon found them and picked them up. Then he looked for the policeman who had seized Xiomara.

The man bellowed obscene words into her ear, then let out a grunting noise that sounded like a moan.

Chico had never felt such rage in all his life. Another police officer tried to grab him; he shook the man off and kept running. Towards the fat pig. He took the three darts he'd picked up and rammed them into the man with all the strength he had, into his fat ass, several centimeters deep.

The pig screamed out and bashed the back of his head against a roof strut. Then he fell forward again, crashing into the surrounding metal buckets and other everyday objects.

He let Xiomara go.

Chico grabbed the dazed girl. He pulled her along with him. Towards the staircase. But there was no getting out that way. Three officers had formed a barricade. They observed the pair with

furious gazes. One of them held a limp, bloodied figure in his arms. Behind them stood Manos and Gioconda, their arms stretched out wide and pressed against the wall. Both were bleeding. The man Chico had identified as the “jefe” was standing right next to his friends and laughing maliciously.

He had to go somewhere else. Had to use the same escape route as before. Only he didn’t know where it actually was or where it led. Chico thought about running away. About freedom. About the place outside of the basement walls.

But he fell to the ground, thoroughly exhausted. Far too tired to form even a single clear thought. The way to safety was beyond him now.

He closed his eyes and didn’t resist as they hauled him up, broke his ribs, and ultimately beat him unconscious.

He woke up in a dark cell. It took a while before Chico dared to move. There were other people around him. Adults.

Carefully, he sat up. He drew a deep breath and struggled to restrain his gag reflex. This room was filthier than anything he had ever encountered. As his eyes gradually adjusted to the twilight, he saw finger-length cockroaches streaming out of cracks in the floor; cloudy water dripping from a broken toilet bowl; puke sticking to the walls.

He felt someone touching him. He jerked back.

"Don't worry," said a rough voice. "I just wanted to check your bandages."

Huh? Bandages? Why was he in so much pain, he suddenly wondered? Why was his face so swollen?

It took a moment for Chico's memories to return. When they did, they hit him like a ton of bricks.

He began to yell, and when the pain between his ribs reminded him how much everything hurt, he sobbed, and when no more tears would come, he sat quietly and remembered everything that had happened.

"You've got to pull yourself together, kid," said the same man as before. "The quicker you calm down, the easier it'll be for your body to recover."

He was old, whiskery, and ugly, with gaps in his teeth, and he didn't seem especially trustworthy. Did Chico have a choice, though? All around him sat men and women who had shown no real interest in his outcries. They stared into the darkness, exchanging a few words every so often before hanging their heads again.

"Where am I?" Chico asked hoarsely.

"In Barrio El Boer's carcél. They brought you in here about a day

ago. Dios—you're still just a kid! How could they lock you up in here? Especially when you're so badly wounded."

"Where's Manos? Where are my friends?"

"You arrived here alone, kid. Sorry." The old man ran his hand across Chico's upper body again. He removed a dirty piece of cloth, dunked it in an equally dirty bowl of water, and wiped the boy's face with it. With a shrug, he said, "That's about all I can do for you."

"Who... Who are you?"

"José. But names don't matter here."

"Thanks for helping me!"

"Don't flatter yourself," he muttered. "Someone had to do it." José cast an angry look to the right. "Just don't go in that corner. That's where the child molesters sit. Otherwise they'll do things to you that..." He stopped short.

"Yeah," murmured Chico, despite not really knowing what the man had been about to say. He could guess, though; he suddenly pictured Xiomara and the police officer.

"Do you know why you're here?" José asked.

"We broke into a house. The pigs caught us. It's all a jumble after that. They hit us. There was blood. And a gunshot."

"A gunshot? Did you fire it? Or one of your friends?"

"We didn't have any guns. Just knives."

"Were your companions older than you?"

"A little.

"I don't understand it. You should be in the juvie out in Acahualinca. Why the hell did they bring you here?"

Metal clanked against metal. A heavy door opened with a creak, and a wide shaft of light fell across the stairs leading down into the cell. Groaning could be heard all around him; people and cockroaches alike hastily retreated into the darkness.

A man entered and stood with a broad stance. “The boy!” he called. “He’s coming with me!”

“Go!” whispered José. Hastily he added, “Don’t talk back to the fat one! Or any of the pigs. Whatever they tell you, agree with them. Even if they accuse you of committing a murder. Trust me.”

“I don’t have all day!”

Shakily, Chico got to his feet. He took the wet cloth, pressed it against his pounding head, and staggered up the stairs. The officer showed him a crooked smirk.

“There he is. Our guest of honor! Nice to see you among the living again. Does it still hurt?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Because you tripped and fell, right?”

“Yeah.”

“No one from the police hit you. Right?” The cop bent over, bringing his face all the way down to Chico’s. He reeked of onions.

“Right.”

“Good boy.”

He poked him between the shoulder blades. Chico lurched forward, his ribs hurting again. They walked along a musty, barely lit passageway. Everything here felt narrow and stifling; it all intensified his fear. He wished he at least knew what was going on.

The small room they entered was barren and stuffy. There were two rickety chairs, a table, and a light. There were also pools of water in the far corners.

A portly officer was waiting for Chico. It was the jefe, the leader of the squad who had caught them. The fat man looked at him expressionlessly.

“Sit!” he ordered.

Chico obeyed. The light blinded him; he could hardly see a thing.

“Here. Some water for you. *Clean* water.”

The boy took a sip. He would do everything the cops said, just like José had recommended.

“You and your friends are in deep shit, kid.”

“Where are Manos and—”

“Did I say you could ask questions?”

The officer gave him a smack on the head. It wasn’t overly forceful. A warning. Perhaps the last one.

“The house you broke into is home to one of the city’s biggest philanthropists.” The man cleared his throat. “You’re probably too young to get what was going on. I’ll tell you anyway. Maybe then you’ll understand just how deep in the shit you are.” He laughed mirthlessly. “We got a tip-off that members of the Salvatrucha mara were planning a break-in.” The jefe circled the table over and over. “As we now know from one of your buddies, Manos, you were sent on ahead to spring the trap. The mara members aren’t stupid. They adjust their plans to match our methods. They knew we were plotting something.”

The man fell silent. Was he waiting for Chico to say something? No, Chico decided; he would stick to José’s advice.

After a while, the jefe continued. He almost sounded a little disappointed. “To be honest, this would all have been cleared up by now, with all of you shoved off into some facility or other, if not for the fact that a shot was *accidentally* fired from one of my colleagues’ weapons.”

“Accidentally?” Chico began to leap out of his chair. The man pushed him down with a firm hand on his shoulder.

“The little slut scratched one of my men in the face. The shot was fired after that. Purely by accident, like I said.”

Chico didn’t understand. Everything was so confusing. He just wanted to get away. Away from this horrible room, back to freedom. He could hardly breathe.

A hand almost as big as his head landed next to him on the table. The middle finger was yellowed from nicotine, the thumb dark blue from corazon.

“I’m being asked uncomfortable questions. Some snotty little upstart from central government wants to know how it came to that. Which means I’m forced to give an explanation. *You’re* going to explain it. You’ll tell them what happened. That your girlfriend went crazy because she was up to her eyes in illicit substances. You’ll tell a little tale with details I’ll lay out for you. All in the presence of a lawyer, with your eyes facing straight at a webcam. Got it?”

“What about my friends?”

“What about them? One of the little bitches is dead, the other in juvie. Your other friends too. Although...”

“Yeah?”

“If you do what I tell you, I’ll make sure they get out quickly.” He pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his shirt pocket. “There’s a person called Carlita Esteban. A whore from your barrio. She’s prepared to assume liability for you all. For a few pesos, of course, that you’ll have to work off for her.”

“We’ll all be free?”

“Yup. Every last one of you.”

“Can I see my friends?”

“Hello? Anybody home?” The fingers beside him formed into a fist. “They’re nowhere near here. What, am I supposed to transport you there by magic just so you can have a good old cry with them?”

“But—”

“The choice is yours, Chico. You can go along with my suggestion. Then you’ll be back in your trash heap, home sweet home, as soon as the day after tomorrow. You can get back to scrabbling around for food with Manos and Gioconda and whatever their names are. Or... Wait, I forgot. There is no “or”! The alternative is that I beat you to a pulp day after day, and every night I throw you back into the same hole you just woke up in. Back with all the dealers, murderers, and rapists.”

Chico understood. It was all very simple. He had to lie to achieve a particular goal, just like he always had.

“I’ll do it,” he said.

“Well then.” The fist vanished from his field of view. “I knew we were going to be good friends. And just so you remember how important friendship is, you’ll be put back into the hole for a while. You’ll be longing to see me again, I promise you.”

Chico offered no resistance when he was dragged to his feet and walked back along the long, dark, cramped passageway. He wanted to cry, but there were no more tears left. All that kept him going was the prospect of helping his friends and eventually being free again.

He did as he was ordered. It was an unnerving process. In front of him was a tiny camera on a stick. A flickering screen showed the woman asking him questions on the other end of the line. She had small, tired eyes and was working hard to look like she was concentrating.

Why wasn’t she here? Why was she questioning him through the Internet?

The jefe had prepared Chico well. He knew exactly how he had to answer the woman. He even managed to rustle up a few tears to make his story seem more believable.

"That all sounds very good, Chico," she said eventually. "It sounds as though the officers didn't overstep their legally permissible bounds. I will note this in my report." She suppressed a yawn. "I have just one more question. One that's not directly related to the death of your friend, Xiomara."

"Yeah?" He didn't understand all of the woman's babbling. She kept using words he didn't know.

"It says in the police report that you disappeared from the officers' sight and then reappeared at some point."

"Y... Yes."

"How did you disappear? The basement wasn't especially large."

"I hid really well. Under a table." Chico could hardly keep his voice from trembling. So far the lies had come easily to him. What he'd said had been a fairy tale that would let him see his friends again soon. But leaving and reentering the basement? That had been eerie. He still couldn't explain it and had no idea how it had happened.

"One of the officers followed you under the table. According to his statement, you suddenly vanished. He spoke of...hmm...what looked like sparks, as if dust had risen into the air and shone in the moonlight."

"With all due respect, ma'am," the lawyer interjected, speaking for the first time after sitting silently beside Chico so far. He was a gaunt man, and really old—at least fifty!—with an old-fashioned pair of glasses sitting crookedly on his nose. "How do these questions relate to the accusations against the local police force?"

"You know exactly how, *sir*." The woman suddenly came alive. "I'm trying to confirm the plausibility of the young and easily influenced witness's story."

“By straying from the portions relevant to the officers’ actions and picking out a detail from the report that was clearly expressed a little imprecisely?”

“I’ll do my job as I see fit, thank you very much. If you disagree with my approach, you’re welcome to lodge an official complaint.” Turning back to Chico, she continued, with a friendly voice now. “So, what happened? How did you disappear so easily?”

Could he risk confiding in this woman? Could he tell her how confused he was? That he didn’t understand what had happened in that basement? Would she believe him? Would she help him? Could she get him out of here and save his friends?

The jefe sat across from him, right next to the screen and thus outside of the camera’s view. At that moment, he pulled out several photos. They showed Paco, Manos, Ruben, and Gioconda. They each had swollen faces; Manos was bleeding like a stuck pig.

The jefe ripped up the pictures into tiny pieces.

“I was there all along,” Chico insisted. “The officer must have lost sight of me.”

The woman stared at him searchingly. “Is anyone pressuring you, Chico? Are you being treated well?”

“I’m…fine. Everything’s fine.”

She hesitated, then said, “For the record: internal review case 836-NAG has reached a definitive conclusion. Barrio El Boer police station is cleared of the accusation of murder of the juvenile casual thief Xiomara, surname unknown. A written report will be delivered within the next twenty-four hours by the prosecutor general of the city of Managua. Juanita Delcampo, over and out.”

The woman waved at him and the signal cut out.

The jefe shoved the camera aside and asked, “Did she disconnect?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” He grinned broadly. “That’s that out of the way. You did good, Chico.”

“Now what about my friends? And me?”

“You’re quite right. You’ve earned your reward.” He shook the lawyer’s hand and waved him out of the room. Once the door had squeaked closed again, he said, “I did everything I could to get your friends transferred back here. No luck, I’m afraid. I don’t have the necessary clearance.”

Chico didn’t know what “clearance” meant, but he could guess what the jefe was trying to say. His pulse accelerated; his head ached.

The man pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket and lit it. “The fact is, you and your friends are burglars. On top of that, you resisted arrest and are guilty of half a dozen other offenses. You all *deserve* to be in jail.”

He took a deep drag. Chico’s headache ran down his neck until it reached a certain point between his shoulder blades and formed a knot there. A knot where all his emotions were concentrated at that moment.

“I’m not ungrateful, kid. You really did play your part well. I’ll keep you here for two weeks, so you can spend some time in the hole thinking about what a mess you made.” He laughed. “If you’re still alive after that, I’ll have you taken elsewhere. To another barrio in the south of the city. I bet you’ll make new friends in no time. Or not.”

“But—”

The grin instantly left the man’s face. “I don’t want to hear any back talk, Chico. You are nothing. You’re worth less than the dirt under my fingernails. Now that the inquiry is over, all it would take is one word from me and you’d be up against the nearest wall and shot. No one will miss you. No one will ever ask about you! Is that clear, Chico? IS THAT CLEAR?”

The shouting. The rage and despair over the cop's betrayal. The fear of spending even one more minute in the hole. The knot in his back. All that and more...

Chico vanished.

In his wake, he left a thoroughly stunned-looking jefe with his mouth hanging open.

He was outside again. There were people around him, none of whom paid him any attention. The sun was blinding.

Chico was impossibly tired. He didn't understand any of this. All he knew was that he had to run away, far away from here, to somewhere the jefe wouldn't find him.

He had no idea where he was. It was a wide shopping street. The buildings were as dilapidated as almost all the ones he'd ever seen. To his right was a police station, recognizable from the rotating yellow column. No doubt he had been inside there moments ago.

Men stormed out, looking in every direction. They were searching for him.

Chico hunched himself up even smaller and fled. He was so tired, his legs so heavy. Not to mention the hunger.

He tripped over the sidewalk. Why did he have to be so slow and clumsy? He got to his feet again and hobbled onwards. A whistle sounded. He ignored it as well as the cars that had to brake sharply when he crossed in front of them. What did he care if they ran him over?

He stumbled again. At least this time it wasn't his fault. Someone had pushed him, right in front of a rust bucket that came to a stop, tires squeaking, just inches from him. A woman got out and cried, "Dios mio!" and many other incantations as she came over to help him up.

But the cops were there. They blocked him off, pushing the woman to the side, and started shoving him back to where he'd

come from. Despite his grazed knees, despite his bloody nose and the pain in his neck, they treated him just as roughly as he'd gotten used to over the past few days.

They brought him back to the station, cursing incessantly and shouting at him. On the doorstep stood the jefe.

For some reason, Chico felt deep satisfaction when he saw the man's pale face. He was ranting about devilry and demons, claiming that Chico was hellspawn.

Oh yes. The jefe was afraid of him.

They gave him something to drink, and when he was finally allowed to take a sip, he was certain that it had been laced with a drug of some kind.

After that, Chico could hardly even tell what was going on around him. Sometimes he was in the hole, sometimes they carried him back upstairs. There were people who called themselves doctors and asked pointless questions that he couldn't answer. A man in a cassock, a priest with a grim face, held a cross to his forehead and shouted at him, covering Chico with his spittle.

People hit him. They did other terrible things to him too, things he didn't understand, between the colorful dreams he had most of the time. He only rarely managed a coherent thought. He heard himself laughing or crying or sobbing. It was all the same. None of it held any meaning.

Until one day...

"There he is, señor." The jefe's voice.

"He looks atrocious, Alberto."

"We had to sedate him. Who knows what other demonic acts he'd have committed otherwise? Now, if we could talk about the financial side of our little deal?"

"Naturally, Jefe. You do know that if I'm swindled, the

consequences will be severe?"

"Yes, señor. It's like I told you. Chico did things that are not of this world. I swear it on my mother's life."

"According to my research, your mother is long dead. In your position, I'd be careful what I said, Alberto."

Paper rustled. Chico tried to raise his head. He was lying on a cot. There were two men. The jefe, whose real name was Alberto, and a thin, wiry man with a scarred face.

One man gave the other a thick wad of banknotes, and the jefe grunted with satisfaction.

"He's all yours, señor. Ideally, I never want to hear one word about Chico ever again."

"You won't, as promised. Mamasita, could you take him, please?"

The shadows to Chico's left formed into a hulking figure. A woman two meters tall wearing a flowing cloak that covered her body down to the ankles. She lifted him up as easily as if he were a feather. In her arms, she carried him along that damn passageway that he'd come to hate so much.

They arrived at the exit. The sun blinded him. Mamasita grunted and put Chico over her shoulder. He could see her heels now. When she took a longer step, it revealed unbelievably fat legs squeezed into thigh-high boots.

Chico felt his head being gently lifted by the person walking behind her. He gazed at a face that was horribly disfigured on one side but that nonetheless looked like that of the Savior.

"Don't worry anymore, my boy. Everything will be fine now. I'm going to help you." The man paused briefly as if to consider something. "A new life begins with a new name. How do you feel about 'Sid'?"

Yes. Sid was a nice name. His head fell back onto Mamasita's

shoulderblades. His sleep was peaceful. He dreamed of the savior who had freed him.

5.

Conversation with a Human

July 9, 2036

He felt better than he had for a long time. The pain that had held a tight grip on virtually his entire body was now only a faint echo.

Or was Crest mistaken? Could he rely on Dr. Haggard's treatment to be enough in the long term? What if it was only a temporary improvement and the disease struck back, worse than before?

He rose from his bed and took a few steps. The room was small, and yet it wasn't. For his current range of motion, it was more than enough. Had he been in better health, however, he wouldn't have had the patience to endure his current situation. Even so, it was...fine. He wasn't lacking anything. There was even a doctor who saw him at regular intervals following the somewhat shorter Terran day cycle.

The room's only door opened to reveal two guards. Humans, of course. They held large weapons with excessively long barrels. Their gazes were unsettled.

One man stepped past them and entered. "You shouldn't strain yourself, Crest," he said. "Maybe it would be better if you got back into bed?"

"Lying down for too long isn't necessarily beneficial to one's health, Mr. Monterny."

"We're measuring your vitals to the best of our ability. Our doctors believe it's about time for you to rest again."

"Your doctors? People who know almost nothing about my metabolism? How can they presume to make any judgments on the state of my health?"

"With the same presumption as Dr. Haggard. He appears to have

been vindicated. You do indeed feel better, don't you, Crest?"

The Arkonide fell silent. He felt nothing but contempt for this man who had revealed himself to be his kidnapper.

On the other hand... Clifford Monterny had something winning about him. Despite his terrible facial scars that no doubt reached far deeper than the skin, he radiated positive values. He believed in himself and his ideas.

"I wish I could offer you more than this one measly room," the human said, raising his shoulders. "The current situation is confusing, and until we get more clarity..."

"Clarity of what?" Crest interrupted. He sat on the edge of the bed. It was true; he was tired and wanted to sleep.

"Perry Rhodan's goals."

"I'm sure you know about his message to the people of this world. He meant exactly what he said."

"Did he? In that case, he's a bigger fool than I thought."

"Because he wants to do good?"

"Because he's going about it all wrong. He's taking advantage of you and believes he can achieve his goals without any help."

"And who's supposed to help him?"

Monterny stood tall. "The United States of America, of course! Nowhere else does such a beacon of democracy exist. We adhere to ideals that have withstood all scrutiny for centuries."

"Perry Rhodan painted me a different picture. One that revealed stains as well. He spoke of national interests that are given precedence over the bigger picture. Of despotism and methods that would be just as at home in a dictatorship."

"Rhodan's views exposed him as a traitor to the cause of good. We all know that certain goals can only be achieved by resorting to

extreme measures."

"We certainly *don't* know that, Clifford." Crest attempted a smile. "My understanding of reasonable policy requires certain boundaries of decency and morality to *never* be crossed."

"You're a dreamer, Crest."

"I am an Arkonide. My knowledge of ethics, morals, and the norms of functioning society compared to one with despotism at its core is far greater than you could ever imagine."

"Let's put that aside for now." Monterny waved a hand, looking neither surprised nor annoyed. "Look at it pragmatically. The US is offering you asylum. We'll make sure that you keep getting better. In return, we ask you to make your knowledge available to us."

He paced a few steps, appearing to consider the point for a moment. In his hands he held a few rolled up pieces of paper.

"It's possible that you don't yet know the impact your arrival has had on Earth. You're being treated like a stock. Like a security whose value far outstrips all others. Everybody wants you. It's not just that you can provide technology that seems like magic to us. More than that, you're also a new factor that no one had accounted for, which could bring the already fragile political and economic balance crashing down."

He smiled at Crest.

"You *will* have to choose a side, Arkonide. Otherwise you're risking a worldwide firestorm. As we speak, underground bunkers and rocket silos are being taken out of mothballs and ciphers are being reactivated that fell into obscurity decades ago. All for nations to get their hands on you."

"I have already decided, Mr. Monterny. I've spoken with Major Perry Rhodan extensively and in great depth. To me, he's a thoroughly sensible young man with healthy views. He has convinced me. More than you ever could with your offer of putting me in the hands of a nation state thinking of nothing but its own

gain."

"You're arrogant, Crest."

"I'm a realist. I know about our superior weaponry. Our military might must seem like magic to you indeed. When he landed in the Gobi Desert, Perry Rhodan gave you just a teaser of what we're capable of. If my colleague, Thora, should lose patience or initiate a search for me using all the means at her disposal, then..."

"Then what, Crest?" Monterny unrolled the documents he had been holding in his hands. "These photographs from the moon might interest you. I'm fairly sure you can identify the location. Do you see this crater within the crater? It was caused by a highly effective bomb—one from Earth. That field of rubble? Well, you can tell what it is: the remains of your starship. It's been destroyed. The ship's crew is no more. You're completely alone, Crest." He smiled; it looked as though he felt pity. "As I said, you need asylum on Earth. You'll have to choose a side, and soon."

6.

Camp Specter

The Past

Chico, who was now called Sid, had emerged from hell straight into heaven.

He got up and smoothed out his bright, clean nightshirt. Just like every morning, he walked to the window to assure himself that he wasn't dreaming. He pushed open the window and breathed deeply.

He saw friendly looking buildings, all of them one storey tall. They had colorful flower beds. Pink roses growing in the half-shade of his own cabin were just opening their buds. Their scent was bewitchingly beautiful. Cacti surrounded a dried up stream. Behind that was a playground that couldn't be used until evening due to the heat. This was bordered by a piece of wall that had been covered over and over again with graffiti art. Sid had been able to immortalize himself on there once already. He had spray-painted an eagle soaring into the air. Free.

Everything around him blossomed and thrived. Bees flitted around calyxes, diligently gathering nectar. Songbirds perched in the trees and warbled their songs.

"You're driving me insane!" said Elmer in a sleepy voice. "Why do you always have to get up so early? It's 5:30 in the morning."

"But the sun is up already!" Sid replied, full of excitement. "Do you hear the dogs yapping?"

"Dogs are barking, birds are singing, insects are buzzing," said Elmer peevishly. He buried his head under the pillow. "And Sids are being annoying."

"Why do you have to be such a grouch?!" Sid took several deep breaths. "Everything's so pretty and fresh and clean. How can you

just stay in bed and not want to get up and play?"

"Shut up already."

Elmer crawled even farther under the covers. Soon he would breathe more quietly, pretending to have fallen back to sleep.

Sid left him alone. His friend had to be *really* tired. Elmer been in the workshop until late last night laboring over some piece of scrap metal or other.

He quickly pulled on a jersey and a pair of shorts—both clean! He got clean laundry every single day!—then gave his face a cursory wash. The second he had spat out his toothpaste, he set out for the cafeteria. His route took him past the other long cabins, the school building, the workshop, and the parking garage.

Near the doorstep of a small garden shed, he stopped and glanced down, looking for Miss Uhura, who had recently been renamed to Mrs. Uhura. He was greeted by weak mewling from half a dozen throats. The proud mother cat's little ones were hungry, as always. Sid slid scraps of bread, meat, and cheese in the direction of their hiding spot. He swiftly pulled his hand back again. Mrs. Uhura loved him better than all the other children, but since giving birth she could get pretty protective. All the same, she meowed graciously and accepted the food offered without any hissing.

Sid hurried onwards to the common room. Jack's tired singing was already there to greet him. As always, the cook was the first on his feet and was busy making breakfast for the now almost thirty children.

"Morning, you tone-deaf old dingleberry!" called Sid, proud that his English vocabulary had gained a new insult the day before.

"Good morning, you little pest. You want some pancakes?"

"Are they ready?" Sid clapped his hands enthusiastically.

"Just like they are every morning. Three extra just for you. An hour and a half before the other kids get here."

“I take back the ‘dingleberry’ part, Jack,” replied Sid precociously.

“And the ‘tone-deaf’ part?”

“That’s staying. Your singing is awful.”

“Marguerita and Pamela disagree. They’re highly impressed by my talent.”

“They have to be. You’re paying them for it.”

Jack was stunned into silence for a moment; he looked at Sid in disbelief, then broke into raucous laughter. “If you were a grown man, I’d have knocked a few teeth out for that.”

“Good thing I’m still a kid, then.” Sid sat in his favorite spot at the long table. “Where are those pancakes you promised?”

“They’ll be stuck to your face soon.”

The undertone in Jack’s words changed. Sid recognized the signs. The cook had a friendly nature, but when he flew into a rage, there was nothing that could hold him back. It would be wise not to provoke him any further.

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

“Don’t worry about it, kid.” Jack nodded at him. “You still have to learn where the boundaries are.” He turned back to the vast stove and took the place marked with an “S” from a hotplate.

Sid thanked Jack politely and dug into the soft, sweet delicacy with gusto. Imagine—as much food as he wanted! In the morning, for lunch, in the evening, and even in between! And it all tasted incredible.

The adults made sure that they ate plenty of fruit and vegetables, had enough free time, and got an education. A lot of the other kids didn’t understand when Sid always asked for more lessons or volunteered for extra tasks. They didn’t get that he’d been missing all that. That he had to catch up to be as clever as they were one

day. For them, the regular daily workload was enough.

When Sid had first arrived, he hadn't known how to write his own name. It had taken him a long time just to learn how to hold a pen in his hand. There had been a few moments of embarrassment before he figured out how to flush the toilet. These were all things the other kids his age, or even younger, had on him.

Sure, there were those who came from other parts of the world and had the same problems as him. They got extra lessons with teachers. Lessons Sid had turned down. He was too proud for that. He would do it all on his own. Just like he had in Manag—

No! He had sworn never to think about his former home ever again, or to ever say the name of that city. He didn't want anything to do with his past anymore.

"Do you know who's coming to visit today?" Jack asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Is it him?" Sid asked.

"Got it in one." The cook smiled. "He sent word last night."

"When? Is he coming in the helicopter? Or by car? Will he bring presents? Do you think I'll get to say hi to him? Damn! I promised I'd write him a letter! Sorry, Jack, I have to leave the pancakes for now. Wait, no, I'll take one to eat on the way. Bye, Jack!"

He ran off, past the smirking cook, and made for the workshop. Frustrated, he realized that he didn't know when Clifford Monterny would arrive. He hadn't waited for Jack's reply. But that didn't matter. Sid's savior always reached Camp Specter late in the morning, regardless of whether he came by plane, helicopter, or car. He still had two hours before school started. He *had* to finish writing his letter.

"You're late, Sid."

Why did it have to be him? What was *he* doing in the classroom?

“I’m... I’m sorry, Dr. Goratschin. There was something I had to do.”

With hunched shoulders, he slipped into his seat in the second row and activated his school pod. He felt Ivanovich Goratschin’s stare on him. The leader of Camp Specter observed him with a look he knew well from Mana...from his former life. It was a gaze without feeling. Sid meant nothing to this man.

“We are all looking forward to Mr. Monterny’s visit,” said the camp leader. “But we cannot allow our excitement to distract us from our work. Is that understood, Sid?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Excellent. As proof of your good discernment, I shall expect to see you this evening at 1900 hours for an additional observation session in lab nine.”

The other children all flinched at once. Some of them suppressed groans. Lab nine...

“Yes, sir,” Sid replied quietly. He knew it would have been pointless to ask for a lesser punishment or attempt to argue in any way.

“Then I shall once more leave you all in the hands of your civics teacher, Miss Yorke. Over the course of the next few weeks, she will enlighten you about the duty you have to the American government and people. Listen well; you’ll be learning about fundamental values.”

Why did he always speak so formally? Sid only understood every second word.

Dr. Goratschin left the classroom. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Even Miss Yorke, who really wasn’t their favorite teacher, looked happy to be freed from her boss’s presence.

Lab nine? thought Sid, full of fear. *Tonight? What the hell does he want with me?*

He quickly forgot his concerns, however. Clifford Monterny would be there in a few hours. The joy of his savior's visit overrode everything else.

He came in a black limousine with darkened windows the same shade. Despite the huge dust cloud that trailed behind it, the car looked as clean as something in an online catalog.

The limo was admitted by the guards without any objections; the gate opened right away. The guards up in their towers gave a friendly wave, their hands on the barrels of their submachine guns.

Clifford got out. Loud cheering broke out in an instant. The children yelled their lungs out, Sid included.

"Don't overdo it," said Elmer, pulling on his arm as he tried to push forward and get closer to the gaunt man.

"Yeah, but..."

"Yeah, but," Elmer imitated mockingly. "Monterny is educating us and our lives are sort of okay. That's all, though."

"'Sort of okay'?! Are you crazy? Camp Specter is a paradise."

"A paradise with fences and guards who make sure that no trespassers can get in—and none of us can get out."

"Oh, cram it!" Sid shook Elmer off and squeezed past the other kids. He liked the blond boy a lot, but sometimes he really got on his nerves.

Somehow he made it to the front, to Monterney. These days he was a lot less clumsy than he used to be in...in...

"Sid! Glad to see you looking fit and well!" Clifford smiled widely and clapped him on the shoulder. "You've put on weight again. You look healthy. Healthier than ever before."

"Yes, sir."

“Enough of that ‘sir’ business! No need for that among friends.”

Among friends… Sid lowered his head so no one could see him blushing.

Other kids stole Monterny’s attention. They pushed and shoved, wanting to touch their benefactor, needing to be near him. Sid could feel himself being driven back, but he accepted it. A sense of warmth was forming in his stomach that would remain there for quite a while. He knew it from previous occasions. As long as Clifford was nearby, nothing and no one could get to him. He felt pure happiness and satisfaction.

“And? How was it?” asked Elmer.

“Good. Very good.”

“If you could see your face, man! You look like a girl just you showed what sex is like.”

“Oh yeah? And do *you* know what it’s like?”

“Not directly…”

“Then don’t talk so much crap about it. Oh, Clifford’s going to the admin building. That sucks. He’ll probably spend hours talking to Goratschin.”

The limo’s suspension suddenly gave way with a squeak. Someone got out, almost unnoticed.

“Hey, do you know who that fat blob is?” asked Elmer, poking Sid in the side. “Is he Monterny’s bodyguard or something?”

“The bodyguard is a she, not a he,” Sid replied without paying too much mind to the newcomer. “She’s called Mamasita, and she helped me back in…in…”

“Yeah, I get it.” Elmer lifted his long, pointed nose high into the air. “I smell trouble. Big trouble.”

Sid went quiet. Those words scared him. Elmer’s nose was feared

throughout the camp. Elmer had an infallible sense for problems on the horizon.

Monterny's here, he thought. *Nothing bad can happen to us.*

Sid's hopes that Dr. Goratschin wouldn't find time for his extra observation session were dashed. At seven on the dot, he arrived at lab nine, pulled the gigantic bundle of keycards from his loose-fitting lab coat, and opened the gate.

Strip lights flared to life. Blinded, Sid closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Dr. Goratschin was already setting up the observation equipment. He booted everything up, activated the pods, and ran functional tests.

"Sit down, Sid."

The boy obeyed. The leather felt sticky. Sticky with sweat, and possibly other liquids too.

"You're always too tense."

Because you make me nervous! he thought. *Because I'm afraid of you.*

"The test is harmless, as always. The stimulus pulses may tickle, burn, or prick, or even engender a bilious feeling, but I promise you that it will cause you no long-term physical or mental harm."

The cap slowly lowered itself onto his head. Inside it were dozens of fine needles, almost too thin to see. They would be located in the exact same positions as usual. Sid had been through this procedure twenty times or more, but he would never get used to it.

Dr. Goratschin—he had the nickname "Ivanhoe," although no one knew where this came from or what it meant—twisted his face into a smile. It looked fake.

"There's no reason to be afraid," said Camp Specter's leader. "I don't want to hurt you, Sid. I like children."

“I’m not a child anymore!”

“Of course not. Forgive me.”

Everything about Goratschin was weird. On the one hand, he treated the children with respect. On the other, he carried out these strange tests, woke them up in the middle of the night sometimes to ask them questions, or made them do exercises that no one understood the point of.

“Making contact…now.”

There came the usual unpleasant prickling against the skin of Sid’s head. It reminded him of having lice, like he had before, in another time.

A screen next to the chair came to life. It showed a spongy growth that pulsated slightly. That was his brain, Ivanhoe had told him a while back. Goratschin’s finger swiped across the gel pod in his lap and the image on the screen changed. It was like he was diving ever deeper into Sid’s brain, following the fine traces of particularly luminous regions.

The itchiness on Sid’s head intensified. It turned into a pulling and burning sensation, then into pain he felt everywhere and nowhere. His feet grew numb; his field of vision narrowed.

Sid couldn’t help laughing. He saw strange things in front of him. Shapes and figures that stretched, grew, contorted, then a moment later turned into tiny insects that merged into each other.

“Don’t worry,” he heard Ivanhoe say. “You might feel a little weak or see things that aren’t really there. The needle clusters are touching peripheral brain regions, which in turn are reacting to the intrusion. Nothing can happen to you, however. Nothing aaat aaall…”

The sound of Dr. Goratschin’s voice changed, shifting into a distorted singsong tone. The images Sid saw were dark and menacing. He wanted to get up and run away, but hand and leg restraints prevented it.

Sid screamed—or rather, *tried* to scream. But he had no mouth anymore. He had nothing he could use to communicate. His mind's command to his voice fizzled out into nothingness. He was crippled now, trapped in his own body and incapable of any movement or stirring of emotion.

Sid was driven along as if pressed against the inside of a giant chrome drum used to wash and dry laundry. He was forced to follow every motion whether he wanted to or not. He was spun back and forth, dunked into water, churned, wrung out, pressed flat, for an immeasurable length of time.

At some point, it ended, and Sid came to. He felt a cold hand on his forehead.

"I hope it wasn't too bad this time?"

Ivanhoe disgusted him so much! Sid wanted to draw back and shake off the hand, but he couldn't find the energy for it.

"I penetrated very deep this time," the doctor continued. He sounded disappointed. "Even though I drastically reduced the stimulus impulses and was able to track the frequency of mental processes without issue, I just can't pin it down."

"Pin what down?" asked Sid, less out of curiosity and more out of the urge to finally say something again.

"Your gift. Your... Oh, you needn't worry about that. Ultimately, it's due to the parallel connections. There are far too many. I'd need a million times more MRI receptors and an equally large amount of computational power to be able to follow the complex connections." For a moment, there was something like fury in the doctor's voice. "That's enough for today, Sid. You can shower and get dressed."

The hand and foot restraints were released. Sid staggered to his feet. His head ached; the floor wobbled beneath his feet.

"You should refrain from overtaxing yourself for the rest of the day, young man. You'll be quite tired."

Goratschin reached over to help him, but Sid fended off his

hands and started moving towards the showers on his own. It was just like always: he felt exposed. It was as if he'd brought his innermost being to the fore and put it on show in front of the doctor. He had a deep feeling of shame.

He got under the flow of water and let it wash over him. Minutes passed. A quarter of an hour, just standing there not thinking about anything.

Eventually he heard the door to the lab closing. Ivanoe was gone. Only then did the tension finally leave him, allowing him to relax.

Clifford Monterney joined them all for dinner. Their benefactor sat at the end of the table, slightly elevated so that all the kids could see him. There was eager chatter all around. Ariane, the oldest girl at Camp Specter right now at nearly fourteen years old, had put on a tight dress and makeup. She was doing everything she could to attract Monterny's attention.

Sid was reminded of experiences from Mana...from another life. Things he only now understood. Women who sold their bodies to make money—and what that must have meant for them.

Ariane was behaving like one of them. Sid felt like he could not only sense her desire, but even smell and taste it. The whole room was soaked in a very specific desire to be loved.

Monterny was horrendously ugly. Half of his face looked like a trash heap that had been compacted to a few centimeters deep. The ruined tissue might have stunk as well; Sid had no way of knowing and didn't want to. After all, he knew that the outward appearance had no meaning whatsoever. The man was filled with a light that masked all ugliness.

Clifford stood and hit his glass with a fork. He waited for silence. "I'm very proud of you all," he said once everyone's eyes were on him. "You're accomplishing incredible things. Dr. Goratschin is always sending me updates about the progress he's making. It's remarkable. I'm convinced that you'll be on everybody's lips one

day because of all the things you'll achieve. For your homeland. For the United States of America. For a better life in a free world."

Sid understood only parts of what Clifford was saying. It didn't matter to him all that much anyway. What counted was that he was talking and that he was there. With them. That he brightened up their lives and made them feel better.

After his speech, Clifford was given a thunderous applause as a send-off. Right afterwards, a helicopter swept in and landed on the forecourt of the convention center to pick up their hero. He smiled, shook each of their hands, waved one last time, then disappeared into the darkness. He left behind a melancholy feeling that gradually grew into sorrow—and the hope that he would come back again soon.

After the flapping of the rotors had faded away, leaving only the usual sounds of the desert at night, they made their way back to their bedrooms. Sid's head felt numb, as it always did after an observation session, but he didn't care about that. Not today.

Elmer, who had been uncharacteristically silent, walked with him. Their cabin was at the farthest end of the little camp. Behind it was nothing but the fence with its watchtowers at each corner. Spotlights swept restlessly across the cleared ground beyond. One of the dog handlers was on patrol right now. His dog snarled viciously when he smelled them, but quickly calmed down again. A tiny orange point flared up as the uniformed man dragged on his cigarette. You could almost believe it was a night like any other.

"Did you know your father?" Sid asked.

"Yeah," his friend replied monosyllabically.

"What was he like?"

"He was a piece of shit. I remember him well. When he came back from one of his drinking in the middle of the night, he used to yell and rampage. He hit my mum. Sometimes me too, and sometimes my little sister."

Sid ducked his head. He was suddenly frightened by Elmer. The boy spoke with quiet detachment, as if he were talking about someone else's life.

"I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry. It doesn't matter. Not anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"He's dead. Mum said he deserved it. That the Lord had judged him and he would burn in hell for his sins."

Sid crossed himself three times in quick succession and said the Lord's Prayer, just as Xiomara had taught him.

"But Mum was wrong."

"What makes you so sure? Hell is where bad people go, right?"

"That's not what I mean, Sid." Elmer cast him a look that he couldn't decipher. "Dad did deserve it, of course. A thousand times over. After what he did to my sister, Cindy... But it wasn't God who judged him." They'd reached the entrance to their cabin. Elmer picked a pink rose, smelled it, sighed softly. Then, lost in thought, he said, "It was me. I killed him, and never, before or since, have I felt like I was doing anything as good as that. There was only evil in Dad. He enjoyed causing pain. So I gave him what he deserved."

Sid stayed silent. Standing next to his friend, he stared out into the darkness. Elmer was a little older than him—and a murderer. One who felt no regret at all. "How old were you when you...when it happened?" he asked after a while.

"Seven."

"That young? I mean, how did..."

"How did I do it?" Elmer laughed joylessly. "I'm gifted. We all have gifts, don't we? We don't talk about it, but we know it's true. I tried out my powers on him. He had no chance, drunk as he was, crawling in front of me on all fours and begging me to stop."

“That’s horrible.” Sid had encountered death in many forms back in…in… Usually, there had been hate or anger involved. Never this kind of coldness.

“He deserved it.” Elmer suddenly turned to face him. “Can I tell you something? I can smell people who are like my father. Clifford Monterny is one of them. He has terrible things in his head. Enough to drive someone insane. He acts like he’s our dad. Buttering us up. I can see it in you, how he lulls you into a false sense of security.” His voice sounded toneless. “What if he snaps one day, like my dad?”

Time passed. More children came to the camp. A lot of them were scared or intimidated and needed time to settle in. Roster Deegan, however, was not like that at all. The sturdily built boy made it clear from the word go that he was the one in charge. He never asked; he took what he needed. He started fights to put himself in a better position. He lied whenever it was necessary. He treated the other children with contempt. Elmer and Sid avoided him where- and whenever they could.

Shanta Preston, another new arrival, had a strange air about her. Something about the girl, a year older than Sid, made everyone stay away from her. Even the adults found it tough to be in her presence too long. With her blonde braids, she was extremely pretty, but she kept every single person at a distance without any of them knowing why.

An older woman with graying hair was introduced to them as Julie Ledge. From then on, having conversations with her became part of their school regime. Sid didn't like her all that much. She acted friendly, but she was interested in his past. She kept probing, wanting to know what his former life had been like.

She was also with Clifford Monterny far too often.

"They're a couple," Elmer insisted.

"Never! She's a dried up old crone, at least forty years old, and he's..."

"He's also over forty." Elmer smirked. "I find it pretty grim as well, but even old fogeys like them still have sex."

It took a while for Sid to get used to the idea that their—what was the word again?—psychologist had a relationship with Clifford. On the other hand, thanks to her, their benefactor visited Camp Specter more often and stayed for much longer... For weeks on end, in fact, during which he'd talk to them a lot, play football or soccer with them, and always have time to lend an ear. In a sense, he protected them from Dr. Goratschin, who seemed to be satisfied.

It was the best time of his life. Sid messed around, made mistakes, played tricks, got scolded. He developed an interest in Ariane, but she just laughed at him. After that he got into fights with other boys, especially the bigger ones. This left him with plenty of bruises and got him into major trouble with Camp Specter's teachers. Still, he never dared to challenge Roster Deegan.

Sid learned. His English got better. He often found himself forgetting the Spanish words for things and opting for the new language he'd struggled with so much at the beginning.

After Ariane rejected him, he decided he'd had enough of girls and swore never to so much as look at another of those wonderfully scented creatures ever again. His visits to Elmer in the workshop became more frequent again. It always smelled of burnt oil, glue, and kerosene there. These were things that reminded him of his former life—of children his age or younger who had sat torpidly on the street huffing the contents of paper bags.

"Do you really think your rockets will fly one day?" he asked Elmer.

"I don't just think it, I know it," his friend replied without looking away from his soldering work. "Dr. Goratschin approved a launch."

"He *what?!*"

"I asked if I could launch *Karl I* from the open area next to the well. He said yes. It'll be in four days, just before sunset."

"How in the world did you manage that? That old bag of bones is always ruining everyone's fun!"

"You've never understood what makes Goratschin tick. He's a dedicated man who puts his work above everything else. And he values dedication when he sees it in his kids. He wants us to show an interest in the world around us and make something of ourselves."

"So we're all supposed to turn into little Goratschins? Eggheads

who think about nothing but work?"

"You can keep picking fights with the other boys if you want. It only works out better for me. It means I get more opportunities."

Sid looked at the part Elmer was working on right now. It measured about twenty centimeters across and was crammed full of electronics. Two screens linked to the object via several thin strands of cable showed rows of numbers that were constantly changing.

"What is that?" he asked.

"Stage three of my rocket." Elmer absentmindedly gestured behind him at two far bigger elements that measured about two meters combined. "One and two will be filled with propellant shortly before launch. They'll carry stage three high up into the air. Up to a thousand meters, if all goes well."

"A thousand meters?! Are you serious?" Sid couldn't comprehend it. Where had his friend gotten the knowledge to make this work of the devil?

"More likely it'll sideslip at an altitude of a few hundred meters. The winds over the mountainous landscape are unpredictable, the telemetric balance is almost impossible to get a handle on, and the fuel mixture is nowhere near good enough to reach the necessary stabilizing speed." Elmer was speaking like a grown-up.

"Can I help?"

His friend turned to look at him, surprised. "Help? But you..."

"I'm a fast learner. I can handle a soldering iron and a welding iron. I have nimble fingers."

"That's true, you do." He pondered the offer. "I've hardly ever seen anyone with your level of craftsmanship."

"Please!"

"I could use an assistant. But I know you, Sid. You lose interest as quickly as you gain it."

“Not this time, Elmer! I promise!” His gaze swept over the various components spread willy nilly across the room. He had a vague idea of how they fit together and what purpose they each served. Excitement came over him. “You’ll never get it finished in time. You need me!”

“*Karl I* is just a first try. Ivanhoe will give me permission for other launches.”

“Not if it stays on the ground or crashes and burns a few meters up.”

“I don’t know...”

“Come on! Please! Pretty please!”

“Let go of my overalls, you pesky little toad! And stop tickling me!”

Elmer devoted himself to keeping his serious expression for as long as possible, but in the end he was forced to give up.

“Fine,” he said, laughing. “You can help. As of now, you are the chief engineer of my team. On a trial basis. If you do a good job, you’ll get a permanent position. If you screw up, I’ll dunk your head in the toilet bowl and flush.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Sid hugged his friend and put a big hearty kiss on his cheek, knowing that it would really rile him up. He smoothly dodged the carelessly delivered punch aimed at him in response. After stepping back, he quickly adopted a more serious tone.

“Why is the rocket called *Karl*, anyway?”

“That was my father’s name,” Elmer replied quietly, thrusting a soldering iron into Sid’s hand.

Karl I shot into the air with a deafening roar. The guards watched it with suspicion, holding their weapons tensely.

Meanwhile, Ivanovich Goratschin looked anything but glad about the launch occurring on Camp Specter's relatively small grounds.

Sid was scared. He had never thought anything could be that loud and stir up that much dust. It was engulfed in a cloud of sand. It reeked of kerosine. His eyes were dazzled.

He concentrated as best he could on the controls, which were spread across three screens. Elmer stayed quiet, almost impassive. He was giving instructions about which readings Sid needed to pay special attention to.

The cloud subsided. Around fifteen seconds had passed since launch. In the red, even glow, there was a grayish trail that followed the flight of *Karl I*.

"Height: four hundred meters," said Elmer. "Some vertical instability. I'll try to counteract it using the ancillary airfoils."

He'd explained a little to Sid about thermals, flight parabolas, and control options. Sid had hardly understood a word of it. But he had learned one thing: it all depended on the pilot. The man whose job it was to keep the rocket under control. In this case, it was Elmer, whose fingers raced across his computer's keyboard at breakneck speed. In real life, it would have been the person crammed into a tiny capsule, executing highly complex maneuvers with the aid of high-performance computers.

"Five hundred meters. Second stage will now be jettisoned."

That would mean additional thrust. Extra stability that would carry the rocket higher, far beyond the especially dangerous range for the fragile *Karl I*.

Elmer looked at Sid. There was pride in his gaze. And gratitude. Over the last two days, they'd hardly slept a wink and had worked well together. Two young men, still kids, in fact, had managed to do something most other people would never have been capable of.

"Six hundred meters."

The rocket disappeared behind a hill. In an instant, all

information was gone. The computer showed nothing but flat lines and error messages. The tiny camera that had so far transmitted fuzzy images from the inside of the rocket, was dead. The screen showed hissing static.

"That's that," said Elmer, disappointment clear in his tone. "*Karl I* must have exploded right after stage two was ignited. We probably made a mistake during construction."

There was no blame in his voice even though Sid had done most of the screwing and welding over the last two days and Elmer had focused on finetuning and programming.

"It's my fault," Sid replied quietly.

"Don't be stupid! We win as a team, we lose as a team. Besides, *Karl I* reached a height of six hundred meters. I'd call that a pretty awesome achievement, wouldn't you?"

Still, they were both sad. Despite the limited time at their disposal, they'd hoped to manage more and construct it a little more precisely.

"Good work, Elmer," said a dark, all-too-familiar voice.

Sid flinched; his friend stayed calm. "Thanks, Dr. Goratschin!"

"Would you mind writing me a report?"

"A *report?*"

"The two of you launched a rocket high into the air. You set up a little control center and collected data, all the while working with a meticulousness that I occasionally wish my closest colleagues would demonstrate. Part of an experiment like this is noting down the results and drawing appropriate conclusions to determine how to improve for next time."

"Next time?" Elmer's eyes widened. "Does that mean..."

"Of course. I'm expecting you to launch *Karl II* as soon as possible. I'll also make a budget available that you can use to plan

and acquire the necessary hardware."

"Th... Thank you, Dr. Goratschin!"

Camp Specter's leader scrutinized them, then turned and left, heading back towards the other children, who were still staring in wonder, marveling at what they'd just seen.

"So, he's human, after all," said Sid once his voice would obey him again.

"Did you hear how he spoke to us? As if we were grown-ups. Like he was proud of us."

Life was good at Camp Specter.

The nights were full of dreams where the names Paco, Manos, Gioconda, Ruben, and Xiomara were dredged up again and again and again. When Sid awoke in a cold sweat, sometimes he would stagger over to the facilities and relieve himself, but sometimes he would just sit there and cry until tiredness overcame him.

Then the sun would come up, casting its still-weak rays across the barren landscape and tickling his nose. It brought new hope and new joy with it. He would run to the window, pull it wide open, breathe in deeply, bicker with Elmer, who inevitably didn't want to get up yet, and thank God that he got to stay at Camp Specter.

Jack would make him pancakes as always and boast about his exploits with women as always. Mrs. Uhura would treat him roughly as always. Her little kittens had long since cut the apron strings. Two had escaped; they had dug holes under the fence and wandered out into the desert. Out there, it was almost certain they had become the prey of large predators.

Classes with Miss Yorke never changed. She told them about all the enemies and powers threatening the United States. About the blessed secret services that tirelessly worked to further the interests of that wonderful country whose border fences reached from one hill to the next only a few miles away.

“Why isn’t Camp Specter actually in the US?” asked Ariane, impudent as always.

“Because it’s in Homeland Security’s best interests for this facility to be as unknown to the public as possible. I’ve told you before that there are people in the United States who cling to mixed up views. As you know, we call them ‘liberals.’ We have to be cautious of them and give them no opportunity to interfere with our plans. You already know about those plans, don’t you?”

“Homeland Security is working to make life better for Americans!” Ralph called out. He was the class overachiever. “Homeland Security protects the USA. Homeland Security stands for our way of life and will defend it whatever the cost.”

“Very good, Ralph.” Miss Yorke nodded at the pale, nondescript boy. “The liberals are the enemies of all these notions. They want to change us. They want to erode values that we’ve fostered for centuries. They want to take away our belief in the one true God...”

Miss Yorke was getting excited about her favorite topic yet again. Once upon a time, Sid had listened to her attentively. That was back when everything at Camp Specter had been new and exciting. Now she was just repeating herself, like a litany recited by the clergyman who visited them once a week to hold prayer services.

Next to him, Elmer suppressed a sigh. He hated Miss Yorke. He described her as a “terminally unsatisfied mummy who needs to dust away the spiderweb between her legs.”

Sid struggled to hold back a snicker. He’d only recently learned what this phrase meant, and now he couldn’t get the image out of his mind.

“Does it somehow amuse you that the United States is beset by all these enemies, Sid?” asked Miss Yorke, placing a hand on his shoulder.

He froze. “I’m sorry, Miss. I was just thinking of a joke.”

“Jokes are the devil’s treachery, Sid. They befuddle us, making us forget to treat our lives as seriously as we should.” Sharp fingernails poked through the thin material of his outer clothing. “I ask you to think about my words. To concentrate.”

“Yes, Miss Yorke.”

“Good. Then I’ll let you off with just a warning this time.”

A nail stabbed deep into his skin. Then the teacher twisted it, sending pain shooting through him. She pulled her hand back and smiled at him. “Now be a good boy and tell us what you know about Homeland Security’s organizational structure.”

Sid stood up and tried to think. He couldn’t let the pain show. There was an unspoken silence regarding Miss Yorke’s treatment, regardless of how painful it turned out to be.

“Homeland Security is the most important force in our homeland’s endeavor to defend against enemies both internal and external,” he said. He had learned this by heart. “Mr. Stanley Drummond is the current government secretary in charge of the bureau. He can take credit for Homeland Security’s uncontested role in the structure of every federal organization. Mr. Drummond has held his position since 2026. Thanks to his judicious actions, the US managed to keep the number of dead and wounded during the terrible tornado season of 2028 to the bare minimum.”

Sid talked and talked, without even thinking about the words he was spouting. It was pure ramble. He was thinking about the evening he’d spend in the workshop. About the new components that were due to arrive in the mail. *Karl IV* was going to be much easier to control than its predecessor.

They were busy working on the microminiature radio control post when one of the guards entered the shed. “González, you’re to report to the boss’s office,” he said while chewing gum. Then he left immediately.

It took a moment for Sid to register that this referred to him.

He'd never actually been called "González." It was just a name written down in the papers he always carried around with him that proved he was a US citizen. In his former life, he hadn't had a surname.

"*Now?*" he said, baffled. "But it's nearly ten o'clock at night."

"Just don't leave Ivanhoe waiting," Elmer replied, not looking up from his work. "You know what a mood he can get into."

Sid carefully put away the precision tool he was using and headed out. Camp Specter was already silent. A breeze was building that made the otherwise oppressive heat outside feel a little more bearable.

He wasn't the first to be summoned to see Ivanhoe and wouldn't be the last. These interviews were a fixture in their lives. All the kids here had special abilities, as was constantly being drummed into them. But no one understood them, and only a few could consciously activate them.

Roster Deegan was the only one who showed his openly. He did it to frighten his fellow students, to get even more respect. He could move things without touching them, like a wizard. A few weeks earlier, he'd made a rock fly through the air and crash into the temple of Krishaw Watson, a two-meter-tall boy from Canada, all because he'd called Roster "short stuff." Krishaw had needed seven stitches.

Sid knocked on the door of Ivanhoe's office. His heart was beating a little faster than usual. He felt an unpleasant tightness in his chest. He looked around for escape routes, following an instinct he would probably never be rid of.

"Come in, Sid!"

He obeyed. The office was meticulously clean. Cabinets lined the walls that, always locked. The room was dominated by a hulking, kidney-shaped desk that looked like something out of a movie from a hundred years ago. The giant monitor extending from the front edge of the desk cut a stark contrast. It stemmed from the scientist's

quirky need to always be the first to try out new computer designs. The screen was made from a glass-like material. Sid saw mirrored writing along with strange curves, diagrams, and photographs.

"You're afraid of me, aren't you?" Ivanhoe leaned back in his chair and interlaced his fingers.

"No, Dr. Goratschin." Sid lowered his gaze and quietly corrected himself. "A little."

"There's no reason for it. I like children. I want the best for you." Ivanhoe sighed. "But I also have to know if you're worth the expenditure. It's not easy to arrange a budget for the continued existence of Camp Specter month after month."

The word "budget" had something to do with money. Sid knew that much. Still, he didn't understand what the doctor was trying to tell him.

"Over the last few weeks, we've carried out tests on all the residents. For many of them, results were encouraging; for others, we must assume they will be leaving us in the near future."

"What'll happen to them?" Sid asked. His heart was beating louder and louder.

"Don't fret, my boy. Homeland Security will continue to provide for them. They'll be transferred to other camps and trained using their facilities. As agents, correspondents, computer specialists, and so on. We won't let anyone fall by the wayside."

"And now you want to test me? To see if I'm allowed to stay?"

"Do you like it here, then?"

"A lot!" he blurted out.

"Excellent. Then let's hope that you achieve the necessary results. You children talk about me sometimes, isn't that right?"

"I don't know what you mean." Sid couldn't keep his face from flushing bright red. Once, he'd been able to lie without the slightest

feeling of shame. That had changed after he'd come here.

"You and the others aren't just afraid of me; I'm strange and disturbing to you. I'm seen as a cannibal who eats children. As an evil being. No?"

Sid didn't reply.

"That may be related to a certain cluelessness that pervades the camp. Neither the guards nor the ordinary staff know what's actually going on here. All they see is a horde of children from all over the planet who perform strange feats and receive a far better education than is generally available. They don't understand why. This lack of understanding gives rise to rumors and fears. Particularly as this location is far from any of Homeland Security's other bases and none of the staff are allowed to talk openly about their work."

"Yes, sir." Sid hadn't understood a word.

"We ourselves bear the blame for these rumors. Our secretiveness doesn't permit a sensible workplace atmosphere, and sometimes this discomfort filters down to you children. Nevertheless..." Dr. Goratschin stood. "You are the most valuable treasures mankind has ever possessed. *Under no circumstances* may you fall into the wrong hands. We must guard you, protect you, and train you, so that one day... Oh, why am I talking so much." He let out a brief, staccato laugh. "You're still too young to understand."

A moment of embarrassing silence followed. Ivanhoe stared at him with a penetrating gaze, as if waiting for Sid to say something.

"Why am I here, sir?"

"You have a very special task to fulfill." Goratschin gestured towards the door behind him, which led deeper into the administration cabin. "*He'll* explain."

The door opened. Clifford Monterny entered, beaming as amiably as ever. Sid rushed over to him, his heart pounding. He wanted to throw his arms around the man, but he thought better of

it. He was too old for that kind of overenthusiastic greeting.

Braking abruptly, he shook Clifford's hand instead. "Good to see you, sir!"

Clifford laughed. In an endlessly familiar gesture, he patted Sid on the shoulder and pulled him closer. "Why all the formality, Sid? It's me, your friend! Have you forgotten me or something?"

"No." Sid enjoyed the intimacy of the hug. The unfamiliar true tenderness that he wouldn't have granted to any other adult. Only Clifford Monterny, and no one else, could see him in such a vulnerable state.

At some point Clifford slowly but firmly pushed him back to arm's length. "You heard what Dr. Goratchin said, right?"

"Yeah. But I didn't understand a word of it." Ivanoe must have left the room. He was nowhere to be seen.

Monterny laughed. "Like I thought. He likes kids, but he talks to you like adults in smaller bodies." He squatted before Sid and looked him directly in the eye now. "Listen to me carefully: Ivanovich wants you to concentrate really hard and go after him. Without moving your feet."

"I don't understand."

"Do you remember the prison in Managua? And the basement you left and then went back into? I know you don't like thinking about that period of your life, but it's important! You have to repeat what you did then."

"But I don't even know what I did!" Sid could hardly hold back the tears. There was no Managua anymore. There was no Chico! That was all locked away in a box in his memory, and he'd thrown away the key.

"You have to do this, Sid! You want to stay at Camp Specter! You have to prove to Dr. Goratchin that you *can* do it. That you're something special. Think about Elmer, about the rockets, the pancakes, the flowers—all the wonderful things here. Do you want

to give all that up?"

Going somewhere without moving his legs. How was that supposed to work? And why was Clifford talking like this? He was making him nervous, and when he was nervous, he usually gave the wrong answer.

"Think! You'll figure out how it works. I know you can do it!"

Sid stood there. Stared at the door Ivanhoe had walked through. Wished he were behind it, in a hallway that led to more offices and the doctor's private rooms.

"Remember!"

No, he didn't want to! There were too many horrible things he'd seen that he never wanted to think about again. His friends. The police officers. The hole...

"Come on, Sid! Try! For my sake."

All of a sudden, Clifford didn't seem so friendly. His voice sounded forceful and demanding. Like that of a normal adult, not a friend.

"It won't work," said Sid, tears welling up in his eyes.

The door opened. Dr. Goratschin came back in. He was grinding his teeth and looked irate. "This isn't going to work, Clifford!" he said. "We'll have to take another approach."

Clifford wavered. He looked strangely helpless, his arms flailing in the air like he was lost for words. Sid had never seen him like *that* before.

"Cliff, that's an order! You're coming with me!"

The doctor was giving his friend orders?! Wasn't Monterny the one in charge around here?

Sid felt like everything had changed in an instant. He felt lied to and betrayed. What was he doing here? Why did they want him to

move without moving? Why were they putting him under pressure? Why...

Why were they locked up in a camp?

Monterny and Goratschin left the room, whispering to each other. The door closed behind them, leaving Sid alone in the most sacred place in Camp Specter. If he wanted to, he could search through Ivanhoe's documents or browse his computer.

What if there were surveillance cameras, though? Those things could be too small to even notice. *Karl IV* had several on board that delivered razor-sharp images.

No, he wouldn't do that. Miss Yorke may have been an old prune with lots of weird ideas, but she'd taught him what he should and shouldn't do. She'd shown and taught him what the limits were. That everything had a value and couldn't be taken without asking.

He was starting to feel quite hot. As much as he wanted to do what Clifford had said, he had no idea how to get through the door. He wasn't a wizard! He wiped the sweat from his brow and shifted restlessly from one leg to the other. He was still standing in the same place; he hadn't dared to go deeper into the room or even walk around the desk.

"Ow!" he exclaimed. Why did the soles of his feet hurt? All he had on were thin sandals. They felt warm and sticky.

He bent down and pressed a hand against the floor. Man, it was hot in here!

Suppressing a scream, he jerked back and stared with fascination at the foaming substance spreading across the inside of his hand. It stuck to his skin and hurt more and more with each passing second.

The floor was as hot as a cooktop, but it was no kind of heat that Sid knew. It smelled awful and seemed completely unnatural.

He was in danger! He had to get out of there as quickly as possible. He ran over to the exit. It was locked. But how? A buried instinct from his former life ensured that he always kept an exit

route in view. He would have noticed if someone had locked it!

The other door, then. Maybe they'd call him a dropout, but he didn't care. He tiptoed past the desk and the cabinets. His hands in agony, he grasped the doorknob. Nothing. This escape route was blocked as well.

Sid braced himself against the wood. Panic set in. He was trapped! How could Clifford do this to him? And why? Had he and the doctor decided to kill him because he couldn't do what they asked?

A thousand thoughts and more rushed through his head. Feelings of betrayal and disappointment swirled together and formed a ball of cotton wool that wouldn't allow any coherent thoughts. He screamed for help. He pounded on the door, begged for mercy, cursed the two adults. He hardly even knew what he was doing or why; he just wanted to be out of there, away from that awful room which was still growing getting hotter. Away from the floor with its stinking white foam that crawled up the desk and chair legs, igniting small blue flames.

He couldn't breathe. He lurched backwards, towards the table, hoping to climb onto it to at least stop his feet from burning. But he didn't make it that far. He stumbled and couldn't keep himself from falling; his body was too weak now. Instinctively, he extended his hands to break his fall. Plunging into the white foam, he felt like it was eating him up, gnawing him down to the bones.

Sid screamed like he never had before. All his senses deserted him. He was going to melt into the white mass and die there.

The last thing he saw were legs rushing over to him and arms that reached towards him. Then he lost consciousness.

7.

A New Patient

July 9, 2036

They had a lot of things to talk about. Plenty to say about the wondrous, barely comprehensible, one-of-a-kind experience of having had an extraterrestrial as a patient.

But they didn't. For one thing, the room holding Eric Manoli and Dr. Haggard was probably bugged. For another, it didn't feel right. In another time and place, they'd have begun a long, animated discussion. Not here, though. Not now.

Their patient had a breastplate instead of ribs. That was the most obvious difference compared to humans. When you delved deeper, however, far more came to light. His DNA, for example. As similar as Crest's DNA was to that of humans, it still showed clear differences. Or the makeup of his blood. The shapes and positions of his internal organs. The consistency of his skin, his fatty tissue, his gut flora...

That wasn't even counting the patient's bearing! Crest's behavioral patterns took a lot of getting used to. His way of thinking could be grating at times, but it was shockingly perceptive. The Arkonide seemed to use the mental capacity available to him with a higher degree of effectiveness than a human. His questions and answers had a kind of light and airy quality, as if they were a matter of course. When it came to some topics, he had no taboos whatsoever; with others, he was extremely reticent. For example, he had hardly made a single comment about aspects of his *Khasurn*, which was something akin to his family.

Eric Manoli was yearning for a cigarette. He lay on his pallet and stared up at the whitewashed ceiling. He didn't know where he was or what was expected of him.

He pressed his fingers together and cracked them loudly. He

wanted to see his patient, dammit! He'd failed the Hippocratic Oath, which he took exceptionally seriously; more so than most of his colleagues, or he'd never have earned a place on the *Stardust*.

"We're deep in the shit, aren't we, mate?" asked Frank Haggard, interrupting the silence.

"I didn't know Nobel Prize winners were allowed to swear like that."

"Nobel Prize winners have an even broader repertoire of swear words than the average person, I'll have you know. Comes from having to deal with the lickspittles always swarming around us trying to curry favor and share in our glory. That's one of the reasons I packed my bags for Africa." He smiled and continued, "I've also had ample chance to get to grips with the local vocabulary here in Ethiopia. There's this fantastic Amharic expression, for example: 'Vay vay doo boos wok.' It means 'You worship my shit.' I could also tell you how thoughtlessly calling people 'spring chickens' led to some tribal feuds.

They both fell silent again. The conversation just couldn't seem to flow.

"Do you know the results of the last round of the *Super Twenty-four*?" Haggard asked after a while.

"Huh?"

"Are you seriously trying to tell me you don't have the first clue about the biggest sporting event of the year?"

"The Olympics are being held two weeks from now in Kuala Lumpur, aren't they?"

"The Olympics!" Haggard scoffed. "Who cares about those? I'm talking about the Rugby Cup where Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa take each other on." He cursed again. "The Kiwis have won the last three tournaments thanks their damn speedy wingers. I mean, all right, they have *some* skill, and the hooker in their scrum is a nightmare to deal with. What I'm wondering is why we haven't

brought in a fly-half that can take on the Kiwi wingers for over a decade."

"Um, sure."

"Johnstone would be a man who could take on the responsibility. Or Ivancics. But their teams are misusing both of them. If they have to wear themselves out in the second row and the defensive tactics suffer, of course it'll add up to nothing."

"Of course."

"And don't get me started on our passing technique. The teams from Wellington, Dunedin, and Auckland are miles ahead of us. It's because schools on the west coast of Australia don't give the boys proper training anymore! They're too soft these days! After the fourth broken nose, they're ready to go back to their mums and hang their cleats up on the wall."

"Yeah, totally ridiculous. What wimps."

"You're telling me, mate! I'd make it mandatory to—"

The door opened. Clifford Monterny entered. The same man who had taken them prisoner and isolated their patient, Crest.

"Hello, gentlemen!" he said, smiling. "I hope you're happy with your accommodation? It was the best I could do on such short notice."

"We're fine," Manoli replied. He slid his legs off the pallet and stood up. "Although we are quite concerned about Crest's condition."

"Don't worry." Monterny raised both hands in a defensive gesture, still smiling. "The Arkonide is doing well. I've had him examined by several of my doctors. You'll be pleased to hear that he's back in tip-top health. A little frail, true, but—"

"We'd like to determine that for ourselves," Haggard interrupted bluntly. "He's my—*our* patient." He breathed deeply. Burly legs showed through his khaki pants; his broad chest and muscular

upper arms underlined his athleticism.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Dr. Haggard. I have my instructions. And, truthfully, I consider them correct. You saved Crests’s life and performed an immeasurable service to humanity, but now it’s time for the authorities to take charge of our friend’s fate.”

“Ones who will harness him for their own narrow-minded interests? Politicians, spin doctors, lobbyists, think tanks?” Manoli replied with rage in his voice. “So, Crest is going to be co-opted by Homeland Security and deployed in their fight against the oh-so-evil Great Russians and Chinese? Partly as a representative of an alien race that’s joined forces with the brave American people, partly as a knowledge base to help you achieve an insurmountable technological advantage over the supposed enemy?”

“You’re walking on thin ice, Dr. Manoli. Your words could be construed as cynicism. And as an insult to the homeland you have a duty to.”

“You still don’t understand that I’ve renounced my citizenship in favor of a larger whole?”

“The United States does not accept this highly irregular act. In the eyes of Homeland Security, you are still a citizen of the US. One who has betrayed your nation.”

“And what about me?” Haggard interjected. “You’re keeping me here against my will, wherever ‘here’ may be. I’m an Australian citizen. This’ll lead to a significant diplomatic conflict, Monterny.”

The man across from them remained serene; he exuded calm and confidence. “That’s a risk we have to accept. Homeland Security reserves the right to do things for the good of America—and the entire world!—that outsiders might not understand. Believe me, though, we know exactly what we’re doing and what’s best for the people of this country.”

“Now you’re the one who sounds cynical, Mr. Monterny.”

“Are you questioning my integrity?” Monterny looked sad and angry all at once.

Haggard shook his head. “Again, I demand that you set me free at once. I want to speak to a member of the Australian diplomatic corps. Homeland Security has the duty to return to the bounds of the law and end this farce, dammit!”

Clifford Monterny nodded. He appeared attentive and acted as though he were actually interested in the doctors’ concerns—as if he himself weren’t the enemy, but a mere middleman. Yes, he exuded trustworthiness to such a degree that it seemed eerie.

“As much as I regret to say it, that’s not possible right now. Dr. Haggard, you have done nothing wrong, and you too, Dr. Manoli, acted in good faith. You’ve both done what you had to do as doctors and saved a life. Even so...”

“Yes?”

“It’s all very complicated. I’m just one small gear in a huge machine; I have to take numerous factors into account. I guarantee that you and Crest are in the safest possible place for the next few days.”

Monterny believed what he was saying. He spoke with so much self-assurance that there could be no doubt about the veracity of his words.

“I also have an entirely personal reason I’d like you to enjoy my hospitality for a while longer. I need your medical expertise.”

Manoli saw a glimmer of a chance. Monterny needed them? He was dependent on their services? Maybe this was an opportunity to make a deal.

“What’s it about?” asked Haggard, throwing Manoli a meaningful glance.

“Another patient. If I could ask you to follow me, please.” Monterny moved aside and gestured for them to step out into the hallway.

Manoli followed the request. His legs hurt; he was overjoyed to leave the cramped cell and finally make use of them again.

Monterny led them up and down stairs through a confusingly laid-out building complex. People in uniforms were everywhere; they bore the insignia of Homeland Security. However, it was the men and women in civilian clothing who made Manoli feel uncomfortable. They looked far more dangerous than the ones with weapons.

The party walked around the edge of a vast auditorium with narrow windows several meters high that offered a view of a densely vegetated landscape of hills and mountains. The ancient cedars growing everywhere were majestic trees that had already stood here when the European settlers had first set foot on the new continent.

Manoli breathed in deeply. If he wasn't imagining it, he could smell a sharp, resinous aroma. Were these the Rocky Mountains? Was the Pacific Ocean hiding behind the mountain range?

"We're in the Adirondacks," said Monterny, responding to the unanswered question.

The East Coast, in other words.

They kept going along painted white hallways, past endless rows of rooms. The sounds of their footsteps echoed off the walls. They hardly saw a single soul, and the few people they encountered had nurses' or doctors' coats on.

"Why all the suspense, Monterny?" asked Haggard. "Tell us what you want from us."

"I want you to see the patient for yourself the way I first saw him. By the way, you should know this man is worth all the money and resources in the world to save him and deliver him from his fate."

One last hallway. It led to a dead end. There was no one in sight; it was as if they wanted to give the impression that there was

nothing to see or find here.

Double doors. Traces on the floor, door handles, and walls gave the doctor in Manoli the impression that they were used frequently.

Clifford Monterny hesitated. Sweat glistened on his forehead, and a few tears clung to the corners of his eyes. “May I?” he offered before throwing both doors open.

In the center of the room was a single patient on a bed. The man was very tall, perhaps two meters. He was asleep. Actually, as Manoli immediately recognized from the surrounding batteries of life-saving equipment, he was comatose. His face was a healthy color, in stark contrast to the impression created by all the machinery. This man looked like he could wake up and start moving around at any moment. He couldn’t have been lying here for long.

“May I introduce the brother of a good friend of mine? He’s been in a coma for almost thirty years.”

“Thirty years?” Haggard interjected. “That’s impossible!”

“The amount we’ve spent is enormous and impossible to justify other than through the importance of a personal friendship.” Monterny’s voice was soft and fragile. “Specialists, alternative medical practitioners, gurus, miracle healers, and priests have all long since given up on this man. Not me. I *know* there’s still life in him.”

Leaving them by the door, he stepped closer to the patient and whispered into his ear. He did this with a self-assurance that looked routine, as though he did it every day and had done so for years.

After a few minutes he turned back to Manoli and Haggard. If Monterny had so far seemed stable and aloof, he was now exposing his innermost self. His vulnerable side.

“I don’t mean to sound dramatic,” he began, “but I’m pretty sure you’re my last hope. Do whatever’s necessary to bring Ivan Goratschin back to the realm of the living.”

8.

The Recognition

The Past

When Sid came to, it smelled of medicine and disinfectant. A wet towel lay on his forehead. It covered his eyes as well; all he saw was a thin band of light. He suspected there was someone nearby.

He tried to brush the towel aside, but couldn't. He was tied up. Defenseless. Just like before, when...

"Untie me!" he screamed, rearing up. "Leave me alone, you damn pigs! You shitheads!"

A voice that sounded vaguely familiar said, "Calm down, Sid. Everything's all right."

It took a few seconds for Sid to pull himself together enough to understand the meaning of the words. He could hardly breathe; he felt appallingly tired. Where were Paco and Manos? Why weren't they getting him out of here? They'd sworn eternal loyalty!

"It's me. Elmer." A hand touched his cheek. It felt comfortably cool. "You're in the infirmary at Camp Specter. You remember?"

The hand pulled aside the wet towel. Sid blinked to get used to the LCD lamp's dazzling light.

"Elmer?"

"Yeah. It's me. The guy all the girls are into. The one who makes rockets."

"I remember." Sid attempted a smile. "Except the part about girls. That's a dirty lie."

"Yeah, well."

“Why am I tied down?” Sid rattled his bonds again. They were made of a flexible, pleasant material that seemed impossible to tear.

“They kept you unconscious for a while so the healing process could go faster. But you got really agitated in your dreams.”

“What happened?”

“Do you remember Ivanhoe’s office?”

There was something there. A vague memory. Of pain, and heat. Clifford leaving him in the lurch. Dr. Goratschin wanting something from him that he couldn’t give.

“It’s all come back to me,” Sid replied, exhausted.

“You suffered injuries that no one can explain. Or that no one *wants* to explain. On your palms, your fingers, and your soles. It’s like you were exposed to acid.”

Sid lifted his head and tried to get a glimpse of his hands. They were wrapped up in colorful gel pads.

“Don’t worry, it’s all okay now.” Elmer shrugged helplessly. “At least, that’s what the doctors said.”

“Untie me.”

“I’m not allowed.” Elmer looked around. “I shouldn’t actually be here at all. It’s during the school day and I’m in Miss Yorke’s bad books at the moment. But the doctors told me you might wake up today.” He looked behind him again, at the door. “Nurse Annunciata will probably show up at any moment. I’ll get going now.”

Sid wanted to stop him. To beg him to stay. He was completely helpless. He desperately needed someone he trusted and could speak to. “Will you come back?”

“As soon as I can tear myself away from class. I promise.”

Elmer nudged his shoulder in goodbye and slipped through the

door. Not a moment too soon; Nurse Annunciata entered a few seconds later. Sid never felt at ease in the butch woman's presence. She was Mexican by birth and spoke mainly Spanish, the language of years past that he wanted to banish from his memory as much as he could.

She started upon seeing him. Then, without the slightest pause, she said that she was relieved to finally have Sid back, that he had been a naughty boy because of all his bad dreams, that the doctors had been very alarmed, but that he'd finally returned to them thanks to regular prayers to Jesus of Tlacahuepan, that he'd have to offer a sacrifice to the saints and finally pay a visit to Camp Specter's small chapel, that if *he* wouldn't do it, she would light candles to show gratitude, and that she'd like him to please be a good boy now while she washed him.

"Can you untie me?" Sid asked after the nurse finally, *finally* took a breath.

"I've informed the doctor that you're awake," she replied evasively. "He'll be here any moment, and he can release you from your bonds." She tenderly stroked a strand of hair out of his face. "Trust me, everything will be fine again."

Elmer came back when night had fallen at the camp. Annunciata must have noticed him, but she was usually happy to turn a blind eye; even two, if tiredness had beaten her. Right now she was either dozing out in the hallway in front of the medical room or pretending to.

"How are you doing?" Elmer asked.

"Great. I'm not chained up anymore, as you can see. But peeing without my hands is pretty tough." Sid gestured towards his thickly bandaged arms.

Elmer smirked. He pulled an almost melted chocolate bar out of his pocket and carefully slid it into his friend's mouth. "I bet you're getting nothing here except vegetable soup, bean casserole, and root beer, right?"

"Right. I'm farting like a mangy coyote all day."

They both suppressed a laugh. They didn't know when Nurse Annunciata might suddenly lose her patience with the two boys. They cracked their jokes as quietly as possible, talked about Ariane, who had been repeatedly asking about Sid's condition, and insulted Miss Yorke in unison. She was still torturing her students with political slogans they had to learn by heart.

Eventually they fell silent and stared at each other. There were things to discuss. Things that Sid had ignored for far too long.

"You knew the whole time," said Sid. "You tried to warn me. I just didn't listen."

"I don't *know* anything." Elmer stared into space. "I just have my own opinion. And I think they're up to no good here."

"Tell me everything. I want to know what's going on. What the doctor wants with us."

Elmer looked around. Was he afraid of spyholes? Cameras? Bugging devices?

“A while ago, I did some research online about Homeland Security,” he said at last. “Access to any sites critical of them is restricted, and I had to be extra careful not to leave any tracks. But as you know, technology is kind of my thing.” He smiled only briefly before turning serious again. “There’s some pretty wild speculation by conspiracy theorists going around. What’s undeniable is that Homeland Security is unbelievably powerful, has a lot of friends in the government, and is essentially a state within a state. The FBI and CIA are in their pocket.”

“And? What does all that have to do with Camp Specter?”

“Nothing, in theory. Because you have to search really deep to find any info about Camp Specter. Officially, this camp doesn’t exist. We don’t exist. There are no records of Sid González, Shanta Preston, Roster Deegan, or Elmer Bradley. You know what that means?”

“Nope. Tell me.”

“If they decide we can’t offer what Homeland Security wants from us, they could shoot us and bury us in the desert. No one would even notice.”

It took a moment for Sid to even realize what Elmer was suggesting. “That’s crazy!” he cried, barely keeping calm. “You read too many bad Kindle books!”

“Maybe. Think about it, though. What kind of sense does it make to stick us here, on the border between the US and Mexico, in a stretch of land called Narco County? Why the fence? Why the watchtowers? Why do they never, ever let us out?”

Sid didn’t reply. He’d never focused on those things before. He was doing well—much better than before! He had official documents that said he was a citizen of the United States. He’d escaped from poverty, slept in a clean bed, was allowed to learn and play, and got more than enough food to eat.

“Homeland Security runs numerous top-secret weapon development facilities. Camp Specter is one of those! To the

military and secret service, we're weapons, Sid!"

"You can't be serious!"

Elmer pointed at him sharply. "We *are* weapons! At least, that's what Ivanhoe and Monterny believe. Those two want to make use of the special abilities lurking inside us. That's why Dr. Goratschin keeps summoning us for testing. Why Clifford Monterny is always bringing new kids here. Or do you think Roster ended up here because of his winning personality?"

Sid silently turned all this over in his mind. Elmer was connecting dots Sid had never seen before. It was all so confusing.

"I'm not a weapon!" he said defiantly.

"Ivanhoe is trying to force you to activate your very special ability. Didn't you tell me you got out of that basement in Managua without knowing how you did it?"

Had he told him about that? Sid couldn't remember. "So?"

"They believe you're able to move through walls. Or transport yourself from one place to another."

"Quit it with all this baloney!"

"It's called a psi power." Elmer smiled. "If you'd downloaded as many Kindle books as I had, you'd know what that meant."

"So you're saying every kid at Camp Specter can go through walls?"

"We all have different abilities. We just don't talk about it. Think about Roster."

Roster. The guy who could make things move without touching them. Sid had always tried not to think about it.

Or about Ralph, who saw through people so easily. Shanta, who sometimes just disappeared, as if she were part of the scenery. Ariane, who smelled good or bad depending on her mood.

“What can you do, Elmer?” Sid asked, clueless.

His friend looked at him, then looked away and gazed into the distance. “I’ll show you,” he said before punching Sid in the stomach as hard as he could.

Sid jerked backwards, held in a scream, and tensed his stomach muscles—and yet all he felt was a hint of movement.

Elmer’s fist was inside his body! The other boy’s fingers unfurled, and Sid felt a tingling sensation where such a thing should not have been possible.

Elmer pulled his hand back. He staggered; all of a sudden, his face was covered in sweat. “Now you know,” he said, barely audible. “You know what I can do. And how I killed my dad.”

Sid felt helpless in a way he rarely had before as his friend began to cry. The tears flowed like a torrent, and he sobbed so loudly that Sid was sure the nurse would storm into the room at any second and tear them apart.

It was possible she had some idea of what was going on here. Maybe she’d even been listening. Either way, she didn’t show herself. Sid silently apologized for the many mean comments he’d made about Annunciata’s fat butt.

“Why are we like this?” he asked once Elmer had calmed down a little.

“No idea. Coincidence. Spontaneous mutation. Environmental factors like radiation or the chemicals that contaminate the ground in certain parts of the world. Genetic defects. I’ve looked into it, but all I’ve found are a few weird theories and a whole lot of total crap.”

“Ivanhoe thinks I’m special just because I could get out of a basement?”

“Yup.”

“Then why did he do *this* to me?” Sid looked at his hands and

feet.

“Because he got impatient. He wanted to tease your gift out of you.”

“What if I’d died in his office?”

“Then you’d be dead. He wouldn’t have cared. Without your psi power, you’re worth nothing to him or Camp Specter.”

“Clifford helped me, right? He came and got me before I passed out.”

Elmer nodded. “That’s what they’re saying. He took you outside and brought you here to the infirmary.” He wiped the last tears from his face. “But who knows what’ll happen next time.”

“Next time?”

“Dr. Goratschin will try again. Eventually, Monterny won’t be nearby, or he’ll lose faith in you. And if you mess up then…”

“Cliff would never hang me out to dry like that! He’s like a father to me! To us!”

Elmer had regained his composure. He nodded again. “I can tell you never had a father.”

9.

The Temptation

July 10, 2036

He Jian-Dong listened to the man in his ear, as always, and passed on his orders. The last few hours had been stressful—even more so than usual. As usual, the responsibility for executing all of Bai Jun's commands rested with him.

A new approach was being taken to the civilians surrounding Perry Rhodan's energy dome; they were no longer to be provided with life essentials. That should have been a relief for the military apparatus, but in practice it was not the case. Not yet.

The logistics had to be rethought, supply routes recalculated, emergency scenarios factored in. A mass panic might break out that could only be brought under control with weapons fire. As such, he needed the right people in the right roles... Team members capable of firing on humans without hesitation and sharing responsibility for the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands.

Was the general making a mistake? It was not his place to judge. His duty was to carry out orders or pass them on as needed. As far as he could, he pushed aside all thoughts of "what if." He was an adjutant; he had to put his trust in Bai Jun.

He looked at the endless flow of trucks following no plan in particular as they rattled from left to right, and right to left, across the sand roads. The ever-present dust had gotten inside his uniform, where it clung to everything, just as it always did. It chafed between his legs, crunched between his teeth, and made new blisters on his feet.

He hated this region.

He gave more orders. The audio track in his ear kept him abreast of updates. His organizational skills had always been top-notch, and

his tactical deftness exceeded that of many cadres in higher military positions.

It didn't bother him that others outranked him. Someday he'd catch up and overtake them. He was young; he had time. And in Bai Jun, he had a powerful advocate.

But what if the general made a critical error in this exceptionally delicate mission? What if he made bad decisions? Wouldn't it be better for him to take a more definitive stand?

No. Critique always had been given as prudently as possible and formulated cleverly enough that he could backtrack at any moment. That feinting and tactical maneuvering formed part of the intrigue one had to perfectly master in order to reach the very top.

He Jian-Dong looked at the time. His food was ready for him. It would be in his container—a dwelling with a modicum of luxury, as he'd insisted on. This contrasted with the general, who was staying in a tent, no doubt as a nod to his forefathers, who had once crossed the steppes as nomads.

He waved his driver over. The car was brought near, and the private deferentially opened the door. He Jian-Dong sat down in the back seat and sighed softly. The inside was almost dust-free. The air conditioner droned and buzzed; it had clever filters built in that could separate out most of the irritating dust particles.

It was a bumpy ride back to the command hill. He had scarcely twenty minutes to get his meal down. Enough time to be full; too little to enjoy it.

Enjoyment is not an ingredient of the soldier's life, he told himself, as he had many times before.

There was the container. It stood some distance away from the general's main tent, but close enough. He Jian-Dong got out and told the driver to wait for him. He marched past soldiers equipped with submachine guns, greeting them with the bare minimum of politeness, and opened the door to his living unit using the thermal scanner. Lights came on. It smelled like food: chicken soup, rice,

some spiced beef.

Mixed in was the scent of sweat.

“Good day, He Jian-Dong,” he heard a voice say as he stared down the barrel of a loaded service weapon.

He wanted to send out a distress call, but his earpiece’s com link was down. With her free hand, the woman before him held a small white box in the air and said, “Don’t be under any illusions. No one can hear you, and no one will come to your aid. For the next twenty minutes, the two of us are completely alone.”

A symbol on her lapel marked this thoroughly attractive woman with dark and delicate features as a truck driver.

“How did you get in?” he asked, feeling hardly any fear. He would get this situation under control; he was sure of that. He knew every trick in the book, as the woman would learn all too soon.

“Let’s just say that the means were put at my disposal.”

“Secret service?” He Jian-Dong asked.

“Yes.” For the first time, there was something akin to uncertainty in the agent’s eyes.

“What do you want with me? Is someone not satisfied with my work?”

“With Bai Jun’s work.” The woman walked backwards, heading to the table. She put away the interference device, picked up the chopsticks, and hastily took a few bites without letting her attention be distracted.

“Were you sent by the honorable General Secretary Huang Hai-Jie?”

“Do you really expect an answer to that question?” She ate some more, impassive. “Let’s just say this. The party is considering withdrawing its support for the general’s current course of action.

“But not officially opposing it.”

“You’re sharp, Jian-Dong.”

Yes, he’d understood correctly. He was dealing with an agent of the *deep state*. With someone who represented the true government authority and made decisions in secret.

The woman put her weapon away. “Peace?”

“Yes, honorable zhǔ.” He bowed. “Peace.”

“Good.” She sat down and gestured for him to take a seat beside her.

He obeyed, presenting as unmoved a countenance as possible even though he knew that this encounter might be a significant turning point in his life.

“I’ve brought a very special delivery in my truck,” the agent said. “The official paperwork says it’s a consignment of artillery shells. I’m actually transporting a number of nuclear warheads. You will ensure that they are brought to the tunnel that leads close to Perry Rhodan’s energy shield.”

His heart pounded. He wanted to say something, but he refrained. The general had ordered him—him specifically!—to watch closely for Chinese secret agent activity, and in particular to make sure the tunnel was guarded. It was as if Bai Jun had known exactly what the deep state agents had in mind.

“From our perspective, Bai Jun is an excellent strategist and has impressively keen perception. However, we have justifiable doubts about his integrity. We must return to an option that the general has so far not considered.” The agent ate placidly. “Should you have any pangs of conscience about betraying your friend and father figure, keep in mind that placing the warheads there is only for the sake of providing another option that my employer wishes to have available.”

Who was her employer? A member of the government? Or the first bureau of the Guojia Anquan Bu, the Ministry of State

Security? Or the Zhong Chan Er Bu, the military secret service? Or even the 610 Office, which was only rumored to exist?

"Perry Rhodan is too valuable to kill," He Jian-Dong protested.

"The opposite opinion has begun to prevail. The American is seen only as a liability. The United States and Great Russia have essentially issued open threats against our homeland. If we don't eliminate Rhodan, the matter of this one man, meaningless in and of himself, and his handful of followers could lead to a nuclear conflict—with a decidedly uncertain outcome, as we both know."

"You sound ready to ignite the nuclear warheads at any second."

"If it's the only way to assure our nation's wellbeing, then of course I am." The nameless woman drank some water. "A decision will have to be made in the next few days. That's the opinion of our experts. For that reason, the warheads are equipped with a time fuse. They will detonate forty hours from now."

This is madness! thought He Jian-Dong. Aloud, he said, "So I'm supposed to wait in complete silence and see if Perry Rhodan can be bested in some other way in the meantime?"

"Precisely. Furthermore, should it be required that the weapons are deployed, it will be your responsibility to minimize the loss of human life." She smiled wryly. "*Under no circumstances* can Bai Jun become privy to our plan. As I mentioned, he has a reputation. We cannot predict how he'll behave."

"What if Perry Rhodan surrenders or we wear him down before the time runs out? What will happen to the warheads then?"

"You'll deactivate them, of course. The countdown can easily be stopped. I'll show you how." The agent finished eating. "I'm still waiting for a yes!"

For the first time in a long while, He Jian-Dong felt overwhelmed. He wished he had more time to think. On one side was his mentor, a great man. Vain, certainly, and arrogant to a degree, but also in possession of a strategic insight that he'd never

seen in anyone else.

On the other side was his homeland, the military, his cadre allegiance. His career.

Which weighed heavier?

“Thank you for your trust, honorable zhǔ.” He bowed. “I will of course do what is demanded of me.”

10.

Wishes and Plans

The Past

His hands and feet had more or less healed. However, where he had been burned and new skin had grown, he remained inexplicably pale, almost white.

They let him out of the infirmary; Nurse Annunciata saw him off with an endless stream of good advice and threats that he'd better follow it all. Only when Sid hugged her did she stop talking, at least for a minute or two.

He tried to get back into his old life as quickly as possible, but whatever he did, it just wouldn't work. Camp Specter was no longer what it had been. The fences surrounding it made him feel penned in. The armed guards unsettled him. The patriotic diatribes from Miss Yorke didn't make him laugh or shake his head anymore. He saw the fanaticism in her eyes and wondered how he'd never noticed it before. As for Dr. Goratschin...

When would he call on Sid again and make another attempt to force him to use his—what had Elmer called it?—teleportation ability?

Sid did his best to avoid standing out. He stayed quiet, answered every question to his teachers' satisfaction, and mostly stayed in his room, hardly even venturing to the workshop anymore. At least his evenings and nights were his own. That was when he'd quietly talk to Elmer and let the older boy tell him about everything suspicious he'd discovered about Camp Specter.

He spoke about bugging devices. Cameras installed in most rooms. Jack from the cafeteria, who seemed so friendly but was actually compiling reports about the kids every day and giving them to Ivanhoe. The attack dogs. The searchlights at night. The strict inspections at both gates. Patrols that walked the perimeter of

the camp day after day, night after night. Gazes that followed them as soon as they got anywhere close to the outer fence.

Sid began to notice all this and more, including the rumors about what the adults called the children: cretins; freaks; monsters. For the first time, Sid realized what it all meant.

Everything had changed. This former wonderland was now a sweltering wasteland, the playground little more than a depressing sandpit. Even the roses seemed to be hanging their heads these past few weeks.

Sid's past had caught up to him. He was beset with fear and panic, and he felt an urge to hide away somewhere that no one would find him.

"Sid?"

He jerked back, dropping the garden shears. They fell onto the compound's annoyingly stony ground with an ugly crash.

"Yes, Cliff?" he replied without turning around.

"We need to talk."

"What about?" Sid sensed the grown-up moving closer to him.

"About the night when...it happened."

"What is there to say? There was some problem with some experiment in the next room, right? Leaking acid or whatever. It happens. I'm back to my old self again anyway."

"No, you aren't!" Clifford Monterny grabbed him by the upper arm and turned him around, making him look directly at the war veteran's ruined face. "We both know that you'll never be your old self again."

"Really? Why not?" Sid shook off the man's hand.

"You kids talk to each other. Sometimes you end up with views

about our work that aren't accurate."

"Do we?" He wanted to look away. But it was difficult, so difficult... Clifford Monterny exuded *goodness*. He felt indescribably trustworthy. If there was one adult at the camp that Sid expected to hear the truth from, it was him.

"It's true that we expect certain things from you. But you're kids. Dr. Goratschin forgets that sometimes. I've had a long, detailed talk with him on the subject."

"He's the boss, isn't he? He decides what goes on in the camp."

"We're friends, Sid. I'll do whatever it takes to convince him that he needs to be patient."

"But he's the boss!" Sid insisted. "He can ask me to come to his office whenever he wants. Look at my hands! Will there be another 'accident'? One where my face gets messed up as badly as yours?"

Monterny turned pale—at least, the healthy half of his face did. "Don't say anything like that ever again, Sid," he whispered. "I like you. More than all the other kids here. But I won't tolerate insults like that."

Sid lowered his head. "I'm sorry, Cliff."

"It's all right." Clifford nodded to him. "We'll speak again soon."

Then he turned and left without saying goodbye.

Managua. The basement. The escape. The fatal shot. The police officer who had threatened Xiomara, and he, the youngest, had had no other wish than to escape and save her.

What had happened back then? How had he managed to summon that strange power? He had to remember! He had to pin down how he'd felt and what he'd thought.

It was so hard. It brought back all these memories. There were voices and sounds and fears—so many fears.

“What’s up with you?” Elmer asked.

“Huh?” Sid shot up from the bed. He must have been talking in his sleep.

The dream had been so real. He’d been back there, trapped in his memories, in a moment he could never escape from again no matter how hard he tried.

“You’re soaked with sweat.” Elmer got up, came over to Sid’s bed, and put a hand on his forehead. “You have a fever.”

“Don’t be silly! I just had a bad dream, that’s all. It happens once in a while.”

“Tell me about it.”

“No way am I...” Sid cut himself off.

Why did he try so hard to block out the memories? Not that he liked Julie Ledge that much, but she’d told him over and over that life was easier if you were aware of who you were. If you confided in someone.

Of course the old crone had meant herself, but he’d never tell her a single word about what was going on inside him. But what if he opened up to Elmer? The way Elmer had done with him about his father’s murder?

Sid took his friend’s hand off his forehead and held it as tightly as he could. He said, “My name’s Chico. I come from Nicaragua. A city called Managua. I lived in a trash heap the size of a country. I did whatever I had to do to survive because there was no one there who protected me. Because I had no parents.”

The words flowed quicker and quicker, like water bubbling over too fast to be contained. It dragged everything with it, bursting through the barriers that he’d built up over years at Camp Specter, destroying all the protective walls and washing them away. Sid turned back into Chico, and Chico once again became the eight-year-old who had done the impossible in his state of fear.

Glittering gold sparks surrounded him. They came from *somewhere else*. They weren't a part of this world, this reality; they were his thoughts and his desires. His wish to flee, to be far away from all the people who wanted to hurt him.

When Sid finally finished and opened his eyes, he was standing outside, right next to the rosebed, with Elmer, whose hand he was still holding.

"So that's it," his friend whispered with a wondrous expression Sid had never seen on his face before.

"That's it." Sid nodded. "And I never want to forget it again."

Clifford Monterny left the camp and still hadn't returned after several days. Julie Ledge suffered from his absence. She looked grumpy in every session she spent with the children, whether alone or in groups. On other occasions, such as shared mealtimes, she was similarly restless and morose.

"I've seen that before," said Sid, pointing towards the psychologist. "She's behaving like an *adicta*."

"An addict?" Elmer replied. "You think Cliff is supplying her with drugs?"

"I don't know. But the longer he's away from her, the worse off she is. Don't you feel sad too when he's gone for a long time?"

"A little," said Elmer with a nod. "Because he makes our lives easier. As long as Cliff is in the camp, Ivanhoe is way more pleasant. Roster is calm, and even the guards joke around with us. Look at them now."

Two lumps of muscle with mirrored sunglasses were sitting some distance away and arguing loudly enough for them to hear that it was about a woman. They were cleaning their weapons with jittery movements. Ammo packs lay next to them. One man had sweat on his brow, while the other had tensed his muscles. They looked like they could go for each other's throats at any second.

Roster Deegan had just put his arm around the shoulders of a girl, Pauline, who had turned pale and shuffled to the side a little. The boy followed her along the bench. His fingers glided deeper, towards the buttons of her blouse. He fiddled with the top button and unfastened it, ignoring the shocked faces of the girl and everyone around them.

Pauline shoved the arm aside, pulled herself away, and ran out of the room without having touched so much as a bite of her food. Roster watched her go. His face contorted into a hate-filled grimace. The plate before him began to rattle, and then shattered.

Two boys who belonged to Roster's group of friends drew nearer, showing endless respect. They talked to him until he calmed down, pushed the shards together into a little pile, and started quietly eating after a few disparaging remarks about Pauline.

"He's dangerous," said Sid. "I know guys like that all too well." *And in a way he reminds me of Paco.*

"He'll calm down again when Cliff comes back," Elmer asserted.

"Then we'd better hope that's soon."

Their prayers were answered. The next morning, a helicopter landed and let two people out before rising into the air again. Clifford Monterny and a scared-looking boy in shabby clothes.

Julie Ledge was the first one to run over. Only in the last few meters did she remember herself and adopt a more measured pace. She greeted him with a handshake that was supposed to look distanced, yet still expressed everything the psychologist felt for the man.

Then it was the children's turn. They leaped around, full of excitement; everyone wanted to say hello to Clifford, to touch him, to draw his attention. Sid felt drawn to the man too, but he resisted the impulse to shove himself in with the others.

He took a look at the newcomer. The boy was thin, almost

emaciated. His eyes had a golden gleam, and Sid could almost see strange waves around his fingers, as if they were radiating heat.

One of them, in other words. But that wasn't what alarmed him. Far more unsettling was the gaze full of affection that the boy directed at Clifford. It was like he was completely under Clifford's spell and would do absolutely anything the man demanded.

He's like you, Sid told himself. *That's exactly how you behave when Cliff is nearby. Like a zombie with no will of his own.*

"Do you see now?" Elmer whispered.

"Yeah." Sid wiped tears from the corners of his eyes. "I have to get out of here."

"Let's go to the workshop," Elmer suggested. "No one's paying us any attention anyway."

"That's not what I mean. I have to get away from this camp. I don't want to see Ivanhoe ever again. I'm running away—whether you come with me or not."

Elmer made it clear that they couldn't *just leave* this heavily guarded camp. It would need careful thought and preparation. They'd need water, blankets, walking shoes, a map of the surrounding area, a compass, and a thousand other little things to even have a chance of crossing the inhospitable desert and reaching the nearest settlement.

"We'll need to find the right moment. A moment when no one's watching us and won't notice we're gone straight away. It'll give us a few hours' head start."

"We could do it late at night."

"That would mean walking in the dark. Are you brave enough for that? Do you think we'd stand a chance against the local wildlife?"

Sid smirked. "I survived the nights in Managua. It can't exactly

get any worse."

Why had he suppressed all the memories of his former life? There had been terrible times, of course, but great ones too. Not to mention the experience he'd gained that would help him to survive from now on, to make the right choices. To find escape routes in inescapable situations.

"We have to train our gifts," said Elmer. "They'll help us during our escape."

"Will they?"

"Think about the fence and the guards. Somehow we have to get past them. Either we teleport, or I take you with me and we walk *through* the fence."

"And how are we supposed to train our gifts? Ivanhoe, Ledge, and Cliff haven't managed to get more out of us so far. They've just made it worse."

"Because they're grown-ups. Because they don't get it. They think they can figure it all out with logic or force it to work."

"Why did it work when I used it with you, anyway? I didn't even have to think about it."

"Because you trusted me and didn't trust Ivanhoe. Because you dug up those memories of your own free will." Elmer took his hand. "And because we're stronger together. Haven't you noticed that strange tingling sensation when we touch each other? Our powers complement each other!"

Elmer spoke about their gifts and the mysteries of them with a casual air that baffled Sid. His friend saw it all so clearly, and he always seemed to know what to do.

"Why didn't you run away sooner?" Sid asked.

"Because I'm a coward," said Elmer with a rueful grin.

"So am I!"

“But together we can rustle up enough courage. We can support each other. So let’s go! We have to learn how to activate our gifts.”

“I have an idea.”

“Yeah?”

“We want to try teleporting together or passing through things together, right? By, like, combining our powers?”

“And?”

“The showers are in the next room.”

“What does that have to do with our training?” Elmer paused a second. “Hey, wait a second!”

“Don’t you think it would give us sort of an incentive to try and spy on the girls while they’re showering? We’d only need to poke our faces through the wall.”

“You’re a dirty pervert!”

“Tell me you’ve never thought about the idea, Elmer.”

“Thought about it, sure.” Elmer looked at the floor, embarrassed. “But I’ve never dared to try it.”

Sid smirked. “But together we can rustle up enough courage. Right?”

Elmer took a moment to consider it, then said, “It would be a test of courage, true. We’d be up against our worst enemy. Naked girls. Bah!”

“Bah!”

Slowly but surely, their training succeeded. The *mental cluster*, as Elmer called it, increased their powers enormously. Together, they were more than the sum of their individual gifts. It was like their powers intertwined and merged into one, letting them achieve feats

that they'd never have imagined in their wildest dreams.

They used the night and early morning hours to try moving about inside their cabin. They managed jumps of several meters, always accompanied by those golden sparks. They slid through walls together, melded with furniture, figured out the quickest possible way to form the mental cluster, expanded and refined their abilities.

This was always accompanied by the fear of being caught by one of the security cameras. One misplaced jump, one false step, and they'd be found out. But thoughts of their goal spurred them on. They didn't make any mistakes. They stayed firmly concentrated on the task at hand.

"I think we're ready," said Elmer at last. He gestured towards the loose planks that were hiding two backpacks ready for their flight. "All we need to do is fill up the water bottles."

"But we still need the right opportunity."

"The day after tomorrow."

"Huh?"

"I hear we're expecting a visit. From Drummond."

"*What?* Stanley Drummond, the head of Homeland Security, is coming here?"

"Yeah. He'll throw his weight around, no doubt. Officially, the point is to 'show the residents of Camp Specter his gratitude and appreciation for their efforts.'"

"I don't know what that means, Elmer."

"Drummond wants to see what we can do. A few of us will have to perform for him. Me for sure. After that, we'll all eat dinner together. The guards will be focused on our special guest. No one'll notice two kids slipping away from the table early."

Sid breathed a sigh of relief. "We couldn't hope for a better

chance. Every morning I wake up afraid that Ivanhoe will come for me."

"Soon there won't be any more fear. We'll be long gone from this place." Elmer clapped him on the shoulder. "We'll be free!"

11.

Conversation with an Arkonide

July 10, 2036

Mount Marcy and Mount Haystack, separated by the craggy Panther Gorge, were just two of the many mountains whose peaks were currently bathed in the light of the setting sun. Several woodpeckers were working on the local spruces with their staccato motions.

Clifford Monterny was tempted to close the window; it would be tough to hold a conversation at a normal volume with all that noise. He refrained, however. Their surroundings were just too charming to shut out.

“So, you couldn’t achieve anything?” he asked Tatiana.

“No, Cliff. His will is strong. It’ll take a while to get through that.”

“Time is of the essence.”

“Are you expecting miracles from me? Again?” Tatiana Michalovna made a disparaging hand gesture.

“Forgive me. I misspoke.” He walked back his words. Getting along with the former head of a business consultancy firm was no simple endeavor. She tended to be harsh and standoffish—and she resisted his powers.

Admittedly, this was because she was the best telepath he’d ever met. Nothing about humanity was beyond her knowledge. She knew what made mass murderers tick and what love, envy, hate, and passion did to the minds of men and women.

“What do you suggest?” he asked instead.

“When you told Crest about the *Aetron*’s destruction, he almost

cracked. But there was something that got in the way." She shrugged. "It was like he had thoughts alongside his thoughts. As if another entity, existing on a different level of consciousness, prevented him from losing control."

"I thought humans had different levels of consciousness too."

"Yes, but it's not the same with Arkonides. I can't explain it, I'm afraid. You'd have to be able to see it."

It was always like that. Mutants' abilities were almost impossible to put into words. The terminology to explain what it felt like to activate their gifts just didn't exist. That's how it was for him, at least.

"What's the point of all this jabbering? Let me at him for a few minutes, and I'll make the old coot spill the beans." Roster Deegan took aim with a dart and threw it at the dartboard. The flight path changed almost imperceptibly, but Clifford noticed the cheating. The tip landed in the triple twenty area.

Deegan picked up the second dart by the pointy end with two fingers. "I'll crush his balls. Arkonides do have balls, right? Or I'll pull out his teeth one by one."

"You will kindly do nothing of the sort, Roster," said Clifford Monterny, making eye contact with the man. "We still don't know what Crest knows or what he's capable of, nor do we know what effect physical violence might have."

Roster Deegan almost flew into a rage, but he ultimately let it lie. He could do nothing against Clifford's power of influence. Sullenly, he flung the dart and scored another triple twenty.

"Am I still needed?" asked the fourth person present, interjecting for the first time.

"I'd like it if you stayed, Tako."

The Japanese native by birth gave a brief hint of a bow. He'd lived in the US long enough to have set aside most of his home culture's habits, but he'd held on to his polite formality. This was

despite everything he had gone through, including the squalid upbringing he'd endured in the vicinity of the ruined Fukushima nuclear power plant.

"Sleep deprivation helps," said Tatiana, bringing the conversation back on topic. "Make sure Crest is anxious. Never let him feel at ease."

"Give him documents that say he isn't healthy after all." Deegan gave an ugly laugh. "That he'll kick the bucket in two weeks and the only one who can help is good old Doctor Deegan." A third dart; a third triple twenty. A drawn out cry of "One hundred and eighty!" played out of a speaker, as they'd heard repeatedly over the last few minutes.

Clifford ignored the interruption. He turned to look at Tako Kakuta, who had indicated with a half-raised hand that he had something to say.

"Do we actually know for sure that this Crest guy has anything to offer us?" he asked. "We know far too little about what he can even do. What if on his starship he was nothing but—forgive the crude comparison—a toilet cleaner who knows nothing about anything?"

"You haven't met him yet, Tako. You don't know what he is. Crest has personality and magnitude. He exudes competence. We also have information proving that he called the shots on board the *Aetron*."

"Our squinty-eyed friend may be right after all, though," said Deegan disrespectfully, pulling the darts out of the board. "The whole world is speculating that Crest is a miracle worker who can solve every problem under the sun. Everyone bets for or against the success of a certain product, but no one knows what it actually does. It's happened plenty of times, right?"

This was one of the rare clever insults from the telekinetically gifted man. Roster Deegan had touched on the real problem: several countries' governments wanted to get their paws on the Arkonide, to boast that he was theirs, without even knowing what he would mean to them.

“Things are complicated,” said Monterny, directing it at no one in particular. “A public appearance by our tall, human-like friend could change the entire world. Bring about chaos, plunge us into a world war—or do tremendous good.” He smiled. “Either way, the existing structures will be torn apart, and new lines will be drawn. Our universally beloved President Drummond will have to make the decisions that benefit us, if you know what I mean.”

Tatiana did and Roster didn’t, of course. Tako Kakuta’s expression remained as impenetrable as ever.

“We’ll take advantage of opportunities as soon as they present themselves. And that will be very soon indeed.”

“So you want to just keep waiting?” Roster Deegan threw one of the darts. It hit the board, then drove itself deeper and deeper into the cork until it disappeared inside and stuck into the plaster wall behind.

“No. I’m going to speed things along for sure. Tatiana, could you come with me? I need your help quite urgently.”

“All right, you stay here,” he told the telepath a few moments later, gesturing to the door leading to the small office Tatiana had used for her last meeting with Crest.

“What are you planning, Cliff?”

“To apply more pressure. No more Mr. Nice Guy; I’ll be telling him how it is. Crest may be able to resist my…charms, but I don’t think he’s unusually resilient apart from that. Especially since he still hasn’t recovered from the side effects of his treatment.”

“Be careful.”

“Is that sympathy I hear?”

“I don’t want you to ruin anything. To kill our wildcard.”

“Don’t worry. Now, let me know as soon as he’s getting soft.” He put a tiny com receiver into his ear and switched it on, then nodded

at Tatiana and waited until she had disappeared into the office.

On the one hand, he did like the woman. She was highly intelligent and had a keen eye for what mattered. On the other, she could withstand his special ability. That made her too independent for him to fully trust her.

Clifford Monterny signaled to the guards by the entrance to let him through, then he stepped into Crest's room.

The Arkonide was sitting up straight on his bed, staring into the distance. A strange scent wafted through the room, as always. The alien's perspiration smelled sweet somehow. It was almost like...grass. Marijuana.

"Good evening, Crest."

"Is it evening?"

"The sun is going down right now."

"I didn't know that a pale yellow sun like Earth's could produce such an impressive display of heat lightning as I was able to witness in Africa."

"Our world is beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is indeed. I only wonder why you want to destroy this beauty."

"No one is intentionally trying to ruin the Earth. We humans are just too stupid to know what's we're doing."

"And you believe you and your friends are the only intelligent ones among a horde of primates?"

"While we're on this vivid primate analogy: they need someone to lead them. Not two hundred leaders, not even ten, but one."

"And you're talking about yourself?"

Clifford Monterny didn't give an answer. He'd come here to ask questions, not to be questioned. "Let's put this little game to one side for now and talk about you."

"What would you like to know?"

"The truth, of course."

"I'll happily tell you whatever you want to know."

“Wrong.” Monterny had an idea of which tactic would be most effective. He would gradually increase the pressure and offer Crest as little opportunity as possible to think or recover. “You tell me whatever you think will satisfy my curiosity. No more, no less.”

“But—”

“No buts, Arkonide!” Monterny paced across the room with long steps. He went back and forth, back and forth, slamming his feet against the floor as loudly as possible. “I’ve been as friendly as I possibly could, but everything I’ve gotten in return has been noncommittal. I’m no longer in the mood to tolerate your blathering. Not one bit.”

Crest’s smile was intended to look disarming, but Monterny could sense the fear behind it. He had a highly developed sense for the mood of whoever he spoke to, human or otherwise.

“Does the concept of torture exist on your homeworld, Crest?” He didn’t wait for an answer before continuing. “To you, we are barbarians, and I’d say you’re right on that front. We occasionally resort to unconventional methods should they prove necessary. And right now, I believe this is *entirely* necessary! I will hand you over to one of my specialists in that particular art.” He took short, loud steps with a military impact to them. “Perhaps he’ll give your fingernails some attention first. Or the skin on the lower side of your upper arms. Humans are extraordinarily sensitive there; did you know that? Or maybe he’ll immediately focus on your teeth, or rather their well-connected nerves. The tiniest tools can cause surprisingly extreme pain.”

“Enough!” Crest waved a hand imperiously. “Save this little speech for those of your kind. I am an Arkonide. Other methods apply to me.”

“Oh, really? The documents I have make it abundantly clear that your pain sensitivity is close to a human’s.” Monterny used his extra special smile, even if it presumably wouldn’t work on his current target. “I implore you, Crest, don’t force me to hurt you! You must appreciate that Perry Rhodan is nothing but a hopeless idealist who’s filled your head with pie-in-the-sky nonsense. He has

absolutely no idea of the reality of the political landscape. His attempt to build a state of his own on Chinese territory with the support of Arkonide technology is guaranteed to lead to bring the whole world down with it."

Crest stared at him in silence.

"You want proof? I'll gladly provide it! Would you like secret documents about the war preparations in Great Russia and China? Dossiers and estimates from our experts in the field? Comparisons of weapon arsenals? The expected impact of a nuclear conflict? Can you, with all your high and mighty moral standards, carry the weight of that on your shoulders? The potential destruction of an entire world?"

There was a soft crackling in Monterny's ear. "Your strategy is working. He's softening up," Tatiana informed him. "He's not used to this mixture of threats and requests for cooperation. Keep going."

"Nothing to say, Crest?" he continued. "Do you not understand what I'm asking, or do you simply not want to? Then you leave me no choice. Follow me. Two of my specialists are already standing by."

"Wait, Monterny." The Arkonide heaved a sigh. In an instant, he looked even older than he was, even more fragile. "Maybe you're right. By no means do I understand everything occurring on this planet. I was hoping I could support Perry Rhodan to fulfill his dream. He's a dreamer, like me."

"Don't let him fool you, Cliff," Michalovna whispered to him. "I'm reading his thoughts more clearly than ever before. He's planning to stay as close as possible to the truth while still lying to you."

"I'm a realist, Crest. I'm involved in a dirty business, and I've made decisions I'm not especially proud of. But someone's got to make them."

"What do you want me to tell you?" The Arkonide's facial expression looked tormented. Perhaps he'd heard statements like

that many times before. Perhaps his people were more like humans than expected.

“First and foremost, I’m interested in your personal history, Crest. Why did you come to Earth?” Monterny pulled over the only chair in the room and sat down on it.

“We were on a research mission.”

“The crew members of the *Aetron* wanted to study us barbarians?”

Crest smiled. “Not at all. For one thing, you would never have had anything to fear from us. For another, we had an entirely different destination in mind. Sadly, a breakdown in our propulsion units prevented us from reaching it.”

“Hence your emergency landing on the Moon.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily call it an emergency landing. It was more that our journey was interrupted for necessary maintenance.”

There was a great deal of pride in Crest. Monterny could feel it. The Arkonide didn’t want to admit that his people’s marvelous technology had crapped out.

“What was your intended destination, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Names and terminology would only bore you, Mr. Monterny.”

“I’ve got something!” Tatiana whispered in his ear. “Whatever you do, stay on this topic!”

“Feel free to bore me,” he said.

“If you insist. Our destination was a planet called Eskaduur. It’s roughly two thousand light years from here.”

Was the Arkonide expecting this number to make him fall to his knees in awe? It was too abstract; it was outside the capacity of his imagination. It didn’t matter to him one bit. The only important

detail was that the *Aetron* was capable of crossing a distance of that size without issue.

“Why were you heading to Eskaduur, Crest?”

“The flora and fauna are extraordinary, and the inhabitants have a highly unusual culture.”

“Unusual in what way?”

“I can’t help wondering why you’re so interested in my goals and plans.”

“Because I can recognize lies when I hear them, Arkonide. You told me you suffered a breakdown. Why didn’t you send out a distress signal? Or set out in an auxiliary craft?”

Crest ran a hand through his white hair in a nervous motion. “That was unnecessary. We could remedy the issue with the equipment we had on board.”

“My God, you’re easy to see through!” said Monterny, smiling again. “At my request, experts from Homeland Security went through the data from the orbital telescopes a second time, and a third. It turns out that your ship was detected a while ago, but a lack of imagination on the observers’ part kept it from being identified as a starship. Do you know when this abnormality that turned out to be the *Aetron* was detected on the Moon? *Six months ago!*”

Crest fell silent.

“Which means you were sitting pretty on Earth’s satellite for half of a human year and doing…nothing! Because you weren’t capable of carrying out the necessary repairs.”

“You misunderstand, Mr. Monterny. We Arkonides have more patience than humans. Our concept of time is different.”

“He’s lying!” Tatiana told him again. “Don’t stop!”

“I doubt that, Crest. You were at death’s door. You’d have died

on the Moon if Rhodan hadn't found you. Which makes me wonder why."

Crest struggled to find a suitable reply. Clifford suspected the Arkonide had just realized his mistake: he'd entered a war of words with an opponent he'd underestimated.

"This woman called Thora. Why hadn't she helped you? Was there no one else there who could cure you? Only when the *Stardust*'s crew arrived—humans!—was there anyone who could assist you. Doesn't that rankle you, Crest? How low you had to stoop! How much it must have wounded your pride that barbarians could manage what your people couldn't despite all their highly advanced technology. How humiliated did you feel?"

"Enough!" Crest waved his hand in a gesture that made it clear he was a lord, not a peasant ready to bend the knee. "My countrymen on board the *Aetron* were not in a position to help me, that's true. We had certain problems that couldn't be contained."

"He's telling the truth," said Tatjana. "Although I can't tell what he actually means by it."

"And you, Crest? You're of sound mind. It would have been an easy matter for you to call for help. Or Thora."

No reply. The Arkonide just stood there, his gaze fixed rigidly forward. He was grasping for words, trying to find a justification where there might have been none. Who knew what motivations these beings might have, so shockingly similar to humans yet still entirely foreign?

"I have a suspicion, Crest. You *couldn't* call for help. You're outcasts. Criminals. Traitors. Hunted by your own people."

"I'm no traitor!" cried the Arkonide. He took a deep breath before repeating more quietly, "I'm no traitor."

"What is it, then? Tell me! What kept you from taking the logical course of action? What are you hiding?"

"Abort!" said Tatiana. "He's starting to panic. His thoughts are

getting mixed up. I'm also detecting those other impulses again, the ones that put themselves in front of his regular thoughts. Let it lie, Monterny. I have what I need."

Tears were welling up in the alien's eyes. He was moving his fingers as if he needed something to cling on to.

"Let's leave it there," said Clifford Monterny in a conciliatory tone. "I didn't mean to pressure you that much. Maybe a little rest would do you good. We can continue this another time. Agreed?"

Crest didn't react.

Clifford walked over to the Arkonide and gently laid a hand on his shoulder. "I only want what's best for you, Crest. Trust me."

The gesture might have worked on most other beings, but not on this one here, not in this moment. There was too much agitation and too much pressure. For today, Monterny's work was done.

"Goodbye, Crest," he said. Then he left the room, walking past the square-built guards to the small office whose door Tatjana Michalovna had just closed behind her. "And?" he asked. "What did you find?"

"It's...a muddle," the telepath confessed. She wiped the sweat from her brow. "And I'm not sure if I've understood everything the way he meant it."

"Enough with the suspense!"

She shook her head. "The scale of it is just so immense." She looked deep into his eyes. "The idea that aliens could land on Earth was a totally abstract one until a few days ago, right?"

"What's your point?"

"Here we are hardly knowing how to deal with the reality that intelligent life from outer space has found its way to Earth. That's already too big, too significant for us."

"Tell me already!"

“Crest was thinking about something far bigger than that, something almost inconceivable. It’s an idea, a vision that’s staggering even to an Arkonide.” Tatiana wavered, trying to find the right words. “Crest is looking for a specific planet. A world on which he hopes to find eternal life.”

12.

Forgetting

The Past

A strange hood hung over Camp Specter like a pall of smog. The instructors and teachers were all exceptionally nervous, Miss Yorke most of all. The otherwise austere woman had spent hours pacing back and forth in restless excitement and had arranged her hair, usually combed back severely, into a more elaborate style that reminded Sid of the hookers in Managua. She repeatedly reapplied her lipstick during class, paying little attention to her students.

The children were made to practice for recitals they'd deliver by heart. The youngest memorized texts about Homeland Security that sounded like prayers. The oldest were taken to one side by Cliff and drilled for top-secret "performances."

Not one adult spoke about their gifts. Everything was rehearsed under a veil of secrecy. Were Ivanhoe and Cliff afraid that the kids would gossip too much? Or were they trying to avoid setting off a panic among the guards and teachers?

Sid didn't know, nor did he care. Not anymore. All his thoughts were on the plan. On those decisive minutes when he and Elmer would get away. He was so nervous he was ready to burst, and when a worried Ariane asked what was up with him, he almost told her the truth. The girl was friendly and treated him nicely. In the end, though, she was a girl. She chattered incessantly and couldn't keep anything to herself.

"One more hour," Sid whispered to Elmer during their lunch break. "Then Drummond'll land."

"Quiet!" Elmer took another spoonful of soup. His fingers were trembling; plenty of it spilled over. "If we keep drawing this much attention, we might as well stand up and tell everyone what we're planning."

“Are we doing the right thing?” Sid wondered aloud. “It’s not *that* bad here in the camp, right? When I think about my old life...”

“Look at your hands and think about what could happen next time Ivanhoe calls you to his office.”

Ivanhoe. Where was Dr. Goratschin anyway? Usually he ate with the children, but he wasn’t there this time. Julie Ledge and Clifford Monterny were talking quietly to each other at the end of the table. Mamasita was close by; the bodyguard hadn’t shown herself for a long time, but today she was there. A monumentally fat woman, two meters tall, with hands as big as skillets and shoulders so broad any wrestler would have been jealous. Mamasita looked around attentively. Her gaze fell on Sid for a moment, but she gave no indication that she remembered him.

“I’m full,” said Sid. “Shall we go back to our room?”

Elmer nodded. No one would suspect anything, especially since everyone knew about their passion for building rockets and they’d already used plenty of lunch breaks to work on their experiments before.

“Let’s go through it one more time,” said Elmer as soon as they were outside. “After the performances will be the thank-yous; Drummond, Cliff, and Ivanhoe will hide away in an office for a while. Then they’ll join everyone for dinner. Tensions will be riding high, with the bodyguards fully focused on Drummond. The guys in the watchtowers will be watching the inside more than the outside too. All we have to do is make it out of the camp and we’re home free.”

Sid nodded, but he had his doubts. He sensed that the plan had weak points. Elmer was highly intelligent, but he didn’t have the smarts or the survival instinct of a Manos or a Paco.

Sid was deathly afraid.

Time passed too slowly. Sid sensed an intense pressure in his chest. He crammed as much candy inside him as he could find.

Chocolate, marshmallows, sticky tablets filled with sugar syrup, jelly fruits...

"He's coming!" cried Elmer, who had been glued to the window for a while now. He pointed at the sky.

The loud flapping of rotor blades could be heard from above. It grew into a deafening roar until the giant vehicle touched down on the ground, stirring up so much sand that they had to close the window.

A second helicopter landed. Then a third. When the dust settled, a good dozen defensive and offensive drones had also descended to surround the three vehicles. Their weapons and cameras moved in a circle, sometimes staying in one place for a moment, sometimes quickly moving about. The control units scanned the environment, even when the appearance and infrastructure of Camp Specter was no doubt registered in their systems already.

"Hopefully the drones won't stick around," said Elmer. "Otherwise we've lost already."

Several men got out of the helicopter that had landed last, most of them dressed in black. One stood out from the others. He was a little smaller and quite gaunt, his ears sticking out slightly. With his gray hair, he looked about fifty.

"Drummond looks younger in the photos," Sid whispered. "But he actually looks like a nice guy."

Ivanhoe appeared and greeted the secretary with a handshake. Drummond stood to attention as if by an old habit and sharply held his right hand up to his temple.

"We'd better go outside," said Elmer. "The others are already waiting."

Dozens of kids, younger and older, had assembled in front of the cabins. They were standing in rows for Stanley Drummond, just as Dr. Goratschin had instructed.

"And our gear?"

“We’ll leave it here,” Elmer replied with annoyance in his voice. “We’ve been over all this!”

“Sorry. I’m... I’m just...”

“Nervous,” Elmer said, completing the sentence. “You’re scared.” He clapped Sid on the shoulders, gave him a good shake, and said, “Listen carefully. There’s no way back now! We’re seeing this through!”

“Yes, Elmer.” Sid stuck another piece of chocolate in his mouth.

“If you doubt our plan for even a second, that spells big trouble. Remember, if Ivanhoe catches on to us, he’ll crush you. The consequences will be much worse than burns on your hands and feet. Do you get that?”

“Yeah. I get it.”

Elmer was scaring him. His friend was so fixated on the escape plan that he seemed unable to think about anything else now.

“Then let’s go!” With a nod, Elmer opened the door and stepped outside.

They both started blinking; the wind was a deluge of sand. Somewhere behind it, Stanley Drummond was waiting for the children. And beyond that man, who suddenly seemed so huge and menacing, beyond metal bars and barbwire, freedom was waiting for them.

It was their first public performance. Never before had the kids wanted, or been allowed, to show off their abilities in front of others. A shiver ran down Sid’s spine as he watched his friends and acquaintances proudly show off their gifts. He’d shoved his way into the rearmost row of spectators. He had nothing to offer. He was worthless, and they let him know it.

Shanta showed what she was capable of first. She could blend into her environment. She remained visible all the while and yet somehow still couldn’t be seen. She turned into a saguaro cactus or

a heap of dirt blocking Drummond's path. Shanta had the unique ability to deceive the eye.

"Very nice," said Drummond, "but not especially well suited to our purposes. Infrared would expose you, would it not? As would simple photography."

He moved on to Ariane. Then he stopped, nauseated, and took a step back. Ariane had decided to stink, and as Sid knew from bitter experience, she was really good at that. Right afterwards, she took on the scent of a rose. She spread feelings of wellbeing and smiled as she did it, holding her arms wide as if she wanted to hug the secretary. The girl exuded love and passion—but it didn't impress Stanley Drummond much. The man nodded and walked on, accompanied by Ivanhoe, who talked quietly and insistently to him.

Elmer was up. He reached out his fingers, concentrated hard, and made them disappear inside a piece of wood before pulling them back a few seconds later. Then he attempted the same thing with his whole hand, and finally with a leg, which he pushed through solid stone. He started sweating and staggering on his feet, but he managed to keep his concentration for more than half a minute.

"Interesting, very interesting," said Drummond, patting Elmer on the head before turning to the next child.

Tako. A Japanese boy who had arrived recently and looked older than anyone else there. He bowed politely and balled his hands into fists. His body trembled with the effort.

Suddenly, he was gone. Vanished, only to reappear a few meters to the right.

Sid's knees turned to jelly. He wanted to scream. There was someone else who could do exactly what he could! Why didn't he know that? Why hadn't Cliff said anything? Tako might have been able to help him! Everything could have been much easier!

Stanley Drummond looked impressed again. He murmured to Dr. Goratschin with excitement.

Finally, it was Roster Deegan's turn. As much as the scoundrel glowered, he couldn't hide his respect for the many armed guards or for the secretary's personal bodyguards, who looked even more threatening.

Roster closed his eyes. He waved his arms about like a magician, no doubt to make his performance look more impressive. A whistling sound filled the air. Sid drew back as a ball shot past out of nowhere and stopped right in front of the telekinetic boy. The glimmering metal ball was about the size of a human head.

Roster's powers were unbelievable. He steered the ball, playing with it, turning it on its own axis. Then he gestured with his hands and it sped away, rushing towards the fence surrounding Camp Specter, stopping just before it collided.

Roster's head flushed. He was trembling. This performance had drained his energy reserves. Still, his force of will was remarkable. Even now, he kept control of the metal ball. He suddenly made it accelerate, and with another boastful hand movement, sent it hurtling at the graffiti wall! A split-second later, there was a hideous crash, as if a volley had been fired from a submachine gun. Memories started forcing themselves into Sid's mind, but he pushed them aside and waited with shaking knees for the dust cloud to lift and the wall to be visible again.

The ball had punched through the wall and left a head-sized hole in it.

Breathless silence reigned. Finally, Stanley Drummond managed to speak again. He whispered something to Ivanhoe and then waved Roster Deegan closer. The boy obeyed hesitantly, but obeyed nonetheless.

Drummond extended his hand and said, "Congratulations, young man! That was exceptional. Our country needs people like you."

Did they? Sid didn't understand the world anymore. Roster Deegan was an asshole. He made trouble and tormented others. He was nobody's friend. He hated everyone other than himself. And the United States needed a guy like him, of all people? How messed up

was that?

Roster stepped back after he'd shaken Drummond's hand, pride and arrogance visible in his face. Drummond turned around. He activated his pod and began to talk animatedly. The air grew more and more restless.

Sid stepped from one foot to the other. Were they all meant to stand around like idiots while the man had his conversation? Suddenly, a commotion broke out. Drummond shook Ivanhoe's hands, then Cliff's, waved to them both—and hurried back to the helicopters, flanked by his bodyguards.

Dr. Goratschin looked angry, as did Monterny and the teachers. Every single one of them had been taken completely off guard by this development.

"I'm sorry," Ivanhoe bellowed over the sound of the vehicles starting up, "Mr. Drummond has an urgent appointment and sadly can't stay any longer. Go back to your rooms; we'll celebrate this evening regardless." He attempted a smile. "You all did well. Very well!"

A sandstorm engulfed them, caused by the drones and rotor blades. Everyone rushed back to the cabins to flee the noise and the dust.

It's over! thought Sid. He was unbearably tired. *We've lost our chance. We'll have to wait for another opportunity to make our escape.*

But would they get one before Ivanhoe summoned him demanding results like Tako Kakuta had delivered?

"We'll try it anyway!" said Elmer. "Right now, during dinner."

"But the guards! They'll—"

"They'll be standing at their posts, same as every damn day! And there'll be patrols. And canine units. And, and and... There are a thousand reasons why we have no chance to get through. But do you want to give up, just like that?"

“No, but—”

“You’ve been a failure so far! Hasn’t that sunk in yet? You have no value to Ivanhoe. And if you show him what you’ve learned in the meantime, that you’re better than Tako, then you’ll *really* be put through the wringer. They’ll brainwash you, drill you like a soldier, take away your own will. You’ll follow orders and go to war for these horrible people. Is that what you want? Wouldn’t you rather get away from here?”

Deciding was torture. Elmer was right, no doubt. On the other side, it was getting clearer by the second that this was *Elmer’s escape*. He was trying to manipulate Sid. He wanted Sid to follow him. To do whatever he said.

And there was something evil in Elmer, even if there was far more good in him than in Roster. If Sid recalled correctly, it was called “fanaticism.” His friend was ready to do whatever it took, cross any boundaries, to achieve his goal. Just as he had when he’d murdered his father.

“Let’s do it,” Sid whispered.

“Excellent.” Elmer grasped his hand and held it tightly. Glancing at the setting sun, he said, “We’ll wait until dark, just like we planned. When everyone goes to dinner. That’ll be our best chance.”

“Now!”

Unnoticed by the other kids, they slipped past the cafeteria cabin to the buildings closest to the fence. From here, they’d have to run about thirty more meters. Then, right next to the barrier separating Camp Specter from the outside world, they’d have to make the decision about how to cross through.

Sid wasn’t sure. Could he teleport to a specific destination? Could he wish himself over to the other side or would he reappear somewhere else entirely? So far, he’d only managed to go where he wanted in about half of his attempts.

And Elmer? He looked tired. His efforts designed to impress Drummond had left him weakened. On the other hand, they'd be stronger when they held hands and formed that mental connection.

What were they supposed to do? Sid was confused. Afraid. Hardly even in control of his own thoughts.

"Go!" called Elmer, dragging him along.

They ran as fast as they could. It was little more than a few steps, yet Sid was completely out of breath when they reached the fence.

"Concentrate!" Elmer demanded, grasping his hand more tightly and closing his eyes.

Sid did the same, pulling himself away from the here and now. He tried to focus on his friend, making the point where they touched into the center of his whole being. He wasn't standing in the middle of the desert anymore; instead, he was *home*. He was in a room, in a house, that encompassed them both.

"You there!" cried someone from outside the "house."

Sid paid no attention to it. He'd just begun to feel Elmer's presence.

"Away from the fence, both of you! You have no business being there!" The voice was amplified by speakers mounted along the fence. The demand no doubt came from one of the guards on duty in the corner watchtowers; Sid felt a spotlight shining on him. It interfered significantly with his efforts to focus.

"This is my last warning! If you don't get away this instant, I will open fire!" The rising and falling siren of an alarm could be heard, along with voices growing louder.

There was Elmer. He could sense him perfectly. In an instant, his friend was as close, as *present*, as he always was when they formed the mental cluster. Now it would work. There was enough strength in them. They could get past the fence any time they wanted, using either method. All they needed was a single conscious thought.

There was something in his friend that scared Sid and made him uncertain for a moment. This darkness, this blackness... It was a lake filled with endless hate. A pool that Elmer drew from, was fueled by. Something that goaded him on. Something evil.

That moment of doubt was too much. Their escape was no more. Beside them, bullets collided with the sand and sprayed from there. People ran over, with Dr. Goratschin and Clifford Monterny at the head of the pack.

How had the two made it there so quickly?

A second volley. Closer this time; better aimed.

“Concentrate!” said Elmer. Panic, impatience, and rage filled his voice.

“No,” cried Monterny, “don’t do that!” And, “Cease fire! Don’t shoot!”

Sid opened his eyes. He saw Cliff coming closer. He was moving unbelievably fast but was still in second place. With a leap that Sid would never have expected from the man, Ivanhoe threw himself on Elmer. He cut the connection. They’d been thrown out of the house they shared. Separated. Now they were each on their own, making them far weaker than before.

Or were they?

Monterny grabbed Sid and pulled him to the ground. He fought back. Thrashed about, punched, scratched, bit, spat, kicked—did whatever he could to escape his former friend’s clutches. Only then would he be able to teleport. The adult’s weight was too much for him to successfully jump.

Elmer was right: he had to get away from here, whatever it cost! This was a prison camp, and they were no ordinary prisoners. They were freaks, people without rights who could be killed or kept alive on the whim of Homeland Security. No one outside of this camp gave a damn about them. If a boy who had once been bought from a prison in Managua got buried in the desert, no one would ask

what had happened to him. No one would even know.

Clifford's efforts grew weaker. Had he given up? Did he feel some kind of sympathy for Sid? Did he want to give him a chance to escape?

Sid followed Cliff's gaze. As if under a spell, they stared at the other pair struggling on the floor. Elmer was sitting on Dr. Goratchin, screaming into his face with intense hatred. Sliding his hand into the man's chest, centimeter by centimeter.

It was a moment that felt inconceivable and unreal. It froze the blood in his veins. Ivanovich Goratschin was screaming. His eyes were bulging out of his sockets, thick veins pulsating at his temples. Blood was spurting out of the horrible wound in his upper body.

Monterny stood and ran over to the inseparable man and boy. He tried to pull Elmer's arm away but found no success. Elmer's whole body was shaking. Then he collapsed, his head falling limply onto Dr. Goratschin's chest.

He was dead; Sid knew it. He'd overextended himself. He'd taken all the hate that had been buried inside him for so long and plunged it into this single act, dragging the man he blamed for his situation into death along with him.

Sid looked around. Others had arrived and were staring helplessly at Elmer and Ivanhoe. No one was paying any attention to him.

He could escape. He was free. He could feel that he had the power and confidence for this one teleportation. The last few seconds had unlocked power in him that he'd never imagined. Nothing and no one would be able to stop him.

He wanted to laugh and only barely suppressed the urge. In the end, Dr. Goratschin really had found a way to activate Sid's gift. *All he had to do was die for it.*

He closed his eyes and did it. He saw golden specks in front of him, and when they faded into nothingness, he found himself in a

different place. On the other side of the fence.

He took a few steps. Toward the hills he had to reach if he wanted to leave Camp Specter behind. Then he hesitated and turned around.

He saw Dr. Goratschin, the dying man, rear up—and an inferno was unleashed. A building went up, igniting as if by magic. With a *whoosh*, the walls and roof were in flames. One man ran out: Jack, the cook. His body was on fire, and his head. It consumed him. He took a few steps, slowed down, and collapsed. Before he even touched the ground, he was no more than ash and dust.

Sid tried to make sense of it. Tried to draw the right conclusions. He looked from Ivanhoe to the fires, from the collapsing buildings to the dying man. It was all connected. Dr. Goratschin had caused this catastrophe. He was a mutant himself—one of them! He had powers he'd kept hidden until now. Ivanhoe could use his mind to set off an inferno.

Three men, dark shadows in front of a brightly blazing wall of fire, attempted to save what they could using a single water hose. However, their efforts were already doomed to failure. New flames kept bursting out of nothing, shooting several meters high as if giant matches had been struck. Hissing and crackling preceded another cabin falling victim to the flames. The school building. Then the cabin the girls lived in, then the boys' wing. Sid's home.

"Julie! Stay here!"

Cliff Monterny had been kneeling in front of Ivanhoe, but he gently dropped the dying man to the floor, still connected to Elmer, and tried to catch his girlfriend by the arm. She was quicker. She hurried away, towards the common room cabin. Towards Sid's friends, who had probably been told to go inside there and stay there.

Cliff raced after Julie with long strides, but she was driven by newfound energy. She was driven to help. Determined to save lives from the catastrophe that would soon encompass the last remaining buildings.

Die already, Ivanhoe, you asshole! thought Sid, full of impotent rage. *Get this over with!*

He could go back and shut off Goratschin's consciousness. Crack his skull with a rock or kick him into submission. There was hate in Sid that he'd never have thought possible. Was that what had driven Elmer in the last seconds of his life?

Part of the common room erupted into flame. The large front door swung open. Sid believed he could make out Roster Deegan running at the start of the pack, then Tako and Ralph. Ariane was among the escapees as well.

Soon, the flow of people stopped. Helpless screams rang out from inside. Something terrible was happening in there. Clifford gesticulated wildly as he spoke to Roster, who was standing by helplessly. Then he pushed past the survivors to the door, which itself soon succumbed to the flames.

Sid wondered if he should go back and help. Using his gift, he might have been able to free the people trapped inside. A spotlight's beam glided past him—then came back. One of the guards had stayed put in the tower, still working as if nothing had happened. As if he weren't equally threatened by the fire.

Sid recognized him—*her*. It was Mamasita, Clifford's bodyguard. He saw her push one of the regular guards aside and reach for the machine gun. He was pretty sure he heard her laughing before she fired one burst after another in his direction. Bullets drove into the sand or collided with rocks, bouncing off and zipping left or right.

He had to move but all strength had left him. If Mamasita stayed still for just a moment and aimed straight at him, he'd have been an easy target, gone in an instant. But the woman had gone insane. The guard cubbyhole was burning, the glass splitting into a thousand melting shards, the wooden roof caving in one beam at a time. She paid no attention to any of that. She installed another burst of ammunition, held the weapon against her shoulder like a toy, aimed, and fired, laughing all the while. As if she could fight fire with fire.

The watchtower collapsed in on itself like a house of cards, sparks scattering out into the night. Under the debris, the clicks of shots being fired still continued. Even as she was dying, Mamasita held her finger on the trigger, obsessed with the urge to kill and destroy.

Total chaos reigned here. Things were happening that couldn't be explained. Sid could almost have believed that among the still-living mutants, some unknown person was causing it all with their mind.

He turned and left. He wanted nothing to do with all this anymore. He had to forget, and he had to do it as quickly as possible. What he was leaving behind was far worse than what he'd experienced and suffered in Managua. There were no words for the horror he'd just had to witness.

He kept walking, and the farther he got from Camp Specter, the quicker he moved. He had enough supplies in his backpack. He would surely make it to one of the Mexican or American border settlements of this no-man's land. And when he got there, he'd hide, steal more supplies, and flee again. What mattered was that he was somewhere safe, somewhere far away from Clifford Monterny and all the freaks who had stayed behind. He would forget a place like Camp Specter had ever existed.

Sid would be completely normal. It was so easy to forget.

He heard a cry in the far distance that sounded like "Julie!"

Who was Julie? Who were Elmer and Cliff?

He didn't remember anymore.

13.

In the White House

July 10, 2036

Time seemed to have passed by President Stanley Drummond without touching him. Maybe he'd benefited from the latest developments in cosmetic surgery, and maybe he wore hair implants. Either way, the spring in his step, the energy in his body, his whole bearing—it was all the same as the man Monterny had first met years ago at Camp Specter.

"How's it going, Mr. Monterny?" asked the President of the United States noncommittally.

"Very well, thank you, Mr. President. And you?"

"I've had better days, as I'm sure you can imagine."

They sat. Drank coffee. Engaged in some meaningless small talk. Then, when the president had had enough, he dismissed the horde of advisors and his personal bodyguards with a wave. His chief of staff pulled a face as if he had a toothache, but the president ignored him completely.

"That's enough of the official part, Cliff." Drummond glanced at the clock. "I have ten minutes. I shouldn't leave the Great Russian foreign minister waiting any longer than that. Right?" The president gave him a wink. It came across as very trusting while also showing Monterny how important this conversation was to Drummond.

"You want to talk about Crest?" Monterny asked.

"Is anyone talking about anything else right now?"

The president gestured at the dozens of screens covering one wall of his office. They showed images from the Gobi, angry political speeches, propagandistic scenes of military mobilizations, troops on the march, streets filled with demonstrators. The faces of

European politicians trying to appear stately despite their arms that always shrugged like helpless puppets. Highly decorated soldiers of Asian, African, or Caucasian origin whose mouths spoke of peace and whose eyes spoke of war.

"The world's always been a madhouse," said Drummond. "But now people really seem to have gone insane. All because of a few relics and one single being."

"The world will survive this. Even this crisis will pass."

"No, Cliff. Not this one. Look at the images; let them impact you a little. I have a whole host of experts who capture the mood and analyze it. The unanimous opinion is that people *want* this one big war. They're tired of all the nerveracking waiting. After decades of this, they want to see a conclusion." He shook his head. "Like I said, people have gone insane. They want to throw themselves into the abyss of their own free will."

The president briefly explained what was going on behind the scenes. What was being strategized, how the nuclear powers were threatening each other and issuing ultimatums, what leverage was being applied and which mechanisms were already being set in motion.

He concluded, "By now, it's an open secret that we've captured Crest. Several nations are willing to risk a world war if we keep him."

"Crest is invaluable. You can't be thinking of handing him over to one of our enemies? Or to those toothless diplomats from the UN?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Drummond smiled wearily, then turned serious again. "Crest is like a speculative stock. Everyone expects wonders from him, but currently we don't know what kind of knowledge he can provide us with. Right?"

"He's still holding back. I think I have him on the ropes, though."

"So your interrogations have achieved no usable results thus

far?"

"No," Clifford Monterny lied without batting an eye. He'd never share the knowledge of a planet that promised immortality. That would stay exclusively in his trusted inner circle.

"What about those flight suits that Crest and Manoli used to fly to Ethiopia? Have they been found?"

"No." Another lie. This one came from his lips just as easily.

Stanley Drummond leaned back and stared at the ceiling, pondering. "Imagine if we could build more just like them on an industrial scale. Or if we knew the principle of energy shields like the one that traitor in the Gobi is using. Our cities would be protected even against nuclear strikes! We'd be invincible! We could bring peace and freedom to the world."

Drummond was, in his own strange way, a fool. The political hardliner believed in all seriousness that the two hundred plus nations on Earth were ready and waiting for a political hegemony "made in the USA."

The president's dreamy expression faded. He looked at Monterny. "I need results, and I need them fast. You have one last chance to crack Crest. Then he belongs to me. Do you get what I mean by that?"

"Yes." He understood. This silly man who thought he was supposed to rule the world wanted to steal his chance of attaining immortality. The idea was unbearable. "I'll see what I can do," he added before standing up.

"Good. We're on the same page, as always." Drummond gave him a brief handshake, saw him off with murmured clichés, then pressed a switch to activate a direct line to Moscow on another display. "My dear Kostadin," he cried exuberantly. "Great to touch base with you again..."

Clifford Monterny left the room.

14.

On the Command Hill

July 10, 2036

Bai Jun sensed that victory was close at hand. Everything told him that he wouldn't have to wait much longer for Perry Rhodan's surrender.

The *Stardust* was now a smoking pile of rubble, and any Arkonide technology that had been installed in it had to be irretrievably lost. As Bai Jun had since learned via other channels, Crest was no longer under the dome. He was in American hands.

He picked up the binoculars. They offered him only a blurry view of the inside of the energy shield. The outlines of buildings could be seen. Some looked svelte and delicate; others were hulking masses that still had an exotic beauty. Bai Jun would all too gladly have taken a stroll through this city of the future.

The situation outside the dome was coming to a head just as he'd planned. For two days, the hangers-on had no longer been given provisions by the Chinese army. They were getting restless. They were hungry, thirsty, and had scratchy throats. Before long, they'd snap from the stress. Without the People's Army stepping in to restore order, fights were already a daily occurrence. Especially since Bai Jun's threat to drive the civilians away with weapons fire hung in the air.

Rhodan would never be able to sit and do nothing for long. He wouldn't allow people to suffer, fight, and die for his sake. He was too much of a terminal idealist, do-gooder, and fool. In two or three days, Bai Jun would accept the American's surrender and bring him to Beijing in a victory march that would be exploited for media attention using every trick of the trade. The trial that awaited him there would decide far more than his own personal destiny.

If no one lost their nerve and the nuclear warheads stayed in

their secret underground silos, China would come out of this crisis stronger than it had gone in, no doubt about it.

China would win. Humanity would lose.

Bai Jun shook his head sadly.

15.

Leaving the Circle

July 4, 2036

John Marshall let go, recoiling at all the thoughts and sensations he'd experienced and sensed as if they were his own.

He felt an urge to throw up. He'd seen things so outrageous, so repugnant, that he'd never forget them as long as he lived. Sid had literally exposed his deepest, darkest secrets to all of them.

But that was only some of what the past few hours—had it really only been a few hours?—had signified. Far deeper than the depths they'd glimpsed was the intimacy, the loss of any distance from the boy. Marshall and the other gifted folks in the room had accompanied Sid on a journey into his innermost being. They'd experienced things, learned things, that no one should have to divulge.

Sid, who was actually called Chico, turned onto his side. Rathfionna, the nurse, was with him in a flash and shifted the cables connecting him to the equipment.

"He's doing better," said Homer G. Adams after exchanging a few words with the Gaelinn in her strange-sounding language. "Rathfionna believes he urgently needs rest now. That will do him a world of good."

Marshall nodded and beckoned Sue to follow him out. Everyone who had participated in the mental cluster with them followed as well, as though he were the group's leader. They made themselves comfortable in the living room; the bodyguard put on his raincoat and positioned himself outside the door. The wind and rain were fierce as the day approached its end.

"Should we talk about it?" Marshall asked the group.

Everyone knew what “it” was. They all looked awkwardly at the floor. There were no words to describe what they’d seen. Being in Sid’s skin had been a horrifying experience.

“We should let it be,” proposed Mercant, “and speak no word of it to the boy either. It’s his decision if he wants to talk about it or not.”

“Agreed,” Marshall murmured, his thoughts murky. He’d learned a lot about Sid but not everything, not by a longshot. How had the boy managed to cross Narco County? How had he survived over the weeks and months before he’d landed at the Pain Shelter? Clifford Monterny had surely sent out search parties. Given the might of Homeland Security, it felt like a minor miracle they had only just located him.

“What happens next?” Sue asked. She was hiding her arm stump inside her oversized pullover.

“We wait,” said Adams, “until Sid is back on his feet. Then we start with the training.”

“Training?” asked Marshall, looking the man up and down.

Adams was struggling to stay composed, as were they all. In his mind, though, he was already formulating new plans. He was thinking about the future, calculating and computing.

“Today was just the beginning,” Adams said. “Working together in the mental cluster showed us what we’re capable of achieving when we stand together. I see great things ahead of us.”

“Are these great things connected to Perry Rhodan?”

“Don’t you find his ideas worthy of supporting? I think that the visionary city that’s being built in the Gobi Desert right now could use a few guards. A squad of extraordinary people just like we have here. A squad of mutants, you might say.”

John Marshall nodded. He was too tired to be able to argue with Adams’s foolish ideas. Nor did he actually want to.

He closed his eyes and surrendered to the vision, the golden future, of a unified humanity forging a path into space.

Episode 6: The Dark Twins

By Frank Borsch

The year is 2036. Since landing in their spaceship, the Stardust, Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull have been stuck in the Gobi Desert. The two astronauts are protected from the Chinese Army by an energy dome, but their chances of surviving the siege for much longer look very slim indeed.

Perry Rhodan refuses to let go of his vision. He is determined to bring humanity together and prevent the threat of global war from becoming reality. And he hopes to bring some of the technology of the humanoid Arkonides, who are stranded on the moon, with him. Much of this technology was destroyed in an explosion, and the only Arkonide currently on Earth is on trial, possibly facing the death penalty.

At the same time, a group of people with special powers have reached the Gobi Desert, hoping to help Perry Rhodan. What they don't yet know is that mortal danger lies ahead...

1.

July 7, 2036

"Okay, let's get started!"

Sid González was waving as he came running towards them across the beach of Owey Island after burying the "treasure" in the sand. He wore a long parka with a fleece beneath.

He was freezing. They all were. Owey Island was exposed, almost fully unprotected from the harsh winds that blew off the Atlantic. Even in July, the often-damp breeze blew away all warmth, leaving any visitors there chilled to the bone.

John Marshall turned up his collar. This tiny island off the west coast of Ireland was surely the worst place on the face of the planet for them to pretend to be the desert. And yet that is precisely what they were doing. Because a young Latino with an uncanny talent wanted it that way.

"Are you ready?"

Sid stopped in front of them and removed his parka and fleece. His t-shirt, far too big for him, flapped in the wind. He reached out, and Marshall took the boy's left hand. The skin on his fingers and palms was unusually pale and soft. Marshall often used to wonder what genetic whim of nature had caused this unfittingly pallid skin tone, but then the origin of that paleness was revealed to him when he accompanied Sid on a psychic journey into his past.

It was the work of a human. A human who thought he was acting with the best of intentions.

The memory, which had become a part of his own experience, gave rise to a feeling of nausea in John Marshall, a feeling of anger. He suppressed the emotion, which was not his own, and took the teen's hand.

Marshall was telepathic, able to read the thoughts of others. He knew what they worried about, and discovered secrets that sometimes remained hidden even to the person whose secrets they were. He also felt their emotions. If he wasn't careful, their worries and fears could become his own, and he ran the risk of losing himself in the process.

Wuriu Sengu took Sid's right hand. The stocky Japanese man, whose thick black hair was always spiked with gel, had a supernatural gift. His mother came from the Fukushima prefecture. Following the meltdown of the nearby nuclear reactor, she hid herself from the evacuation troops for weeks. She sensed that if she gave in, she would never see her home again. The army finally found her and took her with them. Sengu's mother was proven right about never returning home, and she died of cancer several years later in a refugee center. Her illness was caused by the same radiation that presumably gave her son his unique talent—-one that nobody else on Earth had.

Beside him, Ras Tschubai and Anne Sloane held hands.

Ras was a tall, athletic man with dark skin and, like Sid, he was a teleporter. In principle, at least. Both were able to transport their body from one place to another by sheer willpower. However, Ras's ability was not anywhere near as strong as Sid's, despite the conscientious nature of the Sudanese man, who followed a strict personal training regime.

In consideration of Ras's limitations, Sid had paired him with Anne. She was a telekinetic, and she was slim and small in stature. He hoped that it was a burden light enough for Ras to overcome. Marshall avoided looking at Anne. He felt attracted to her, but such feelings were completely out of place at a moment like this, he warned himself. Later, perhaps. If there ever was a later.

Sid nodded, satisfied, and spoke into the headset of his transceiver. "Allan, we're ready to go. How are things on your end?"

"I'm frozen to the bone," the words that reached Marshall through his headset, "and Sue is about to be blown away by the

next gust of wind. So let's get out of here!"

Marshall turned his head and saw two people standing a few hundred meters away on the highest point of Owey Island. A man with a gun and a child.

They were a strange pair to behold. Allan Mercant was a former secret agent who had removed himself from the battles of the superpowers that had once given his life meaning. And Sue, the girl with a stump for an arm, trapped in the body of a child, wanting nothing more than to be like everyone else. Sue had wanted to be part of Sid's storm across the beach.

"Why?" Sid had asked, dismissing her in that gruff tone of voice typical of teenagers. "You can't do anything that's of use to us!"

"We're ready to go!" Sid now announced. He turned to the mutants. "You know what's at stake. Perry Rhodan is in a tight predicament. He and his companions are in the Gobi, under siege by the Chinese. The only thing protecting them is the Arkonides' energy shield. But we don't know how long it can keep that up. Rhodan needs our help—-and he's going to get it. But we have to practice first. Concentrate!" He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and hissed, "Go!"

It was as if the boy had conjured up a thunderstorm out of nothing. Sparks flew out of nowhere, shrouding him, Wuriu, and Marshall. The telepath was overcome by a wave of heat that swept over his frozen body like embers, and a second later he found himself in a sea of sparks, standing more than two hundred meters farther north down the beach. The point where he stood lay in the middle of the two markings Sid had drawn into the sand with an iron bar. The outside marking stood for the siege line, the inside one for the Arkonide energy shield—-their destination.

Sid let go. His hands were damp with sweat, as was his entire body. His ability required energy, and providing it was extremely strenuous for his entire body. Once he had achieved it, it took a great deal of effort to maintain.

Marshall waited for Ras and Anne to appear out of nothing

beside him, but they did not come. Where were they? He turned around, and saw that they had remained far behind the marking that stood for the Chinese army.

Not a good sign.

“What are you waiting for?” Sid called when the two didn’t move. “Come on!” he shouted, waving to them.

Ras and Anne ran across the beach. The Sudanese man could not hide the fact that he was ashamed of his shortcomings.The pair let each other’s hands go. Ras was similarly bathed in sweat, having given the attempt everything he had.

Sid left the man no time for the apology that was no doubt on the tip of his tongue. “Onwards!” he shouted, running ahead. Marshall and the others followed. “Stay close together!”

They drew so close that their elbows banged each other while running.

“Anne! Your turn! The shield!”

“I’m on it!” the telekinetic answered. She let out a sigh, and her breath sped up until she was panting and gasping for air. Beads of sweat suddenly appeared on her forehead, as if someone had created them by flicking a switch inside of her body.

Marshall was surprised to see that. Anne Sloane was wiry and very sporty, and running across the beach should have been nothing for her. It was her mind that was working hard. She was able to move objects without touching them, using only her mind. She was now trying to generate an invisible barrier at her back similar to the Arkonide energy shield. They needed the shield to prevent this from becoming a suicide mission. The Chinese soldiers would shoot to kill anyone who dared to enter the zone.

Shots rang out. They came from Allan Mercant, who was firing at the mutants as agreed. Marshall heard muffled sounds behind him and, turning his head as he ran, saw rubber bullets hit an invisible wall only to fall to the sand like pieces of chewing gum that had

been flattened underfoot.

Sid had insisted on the gunfire for the purposes of realism. And Mercant had complied without hesitation. Marshall, who was able to sense Mercant's emotions, knew that deep down he was very gentle. But outwardly, he could give as hard as he could take.

Bullet after bullet impacted the invisible wall and fell to the ground as they ran across the beach. Finally, they reached the line of stones that represented the energy dome. Sid threw himself flat on the ground, and the others followed his example.

The damp sand was stirred up by his impact, and he got some in his mouth. It was gritty between his teeth and tasted like rotten fish. Marshall spat it out and asked himself what the sand of the Gobi Desert would taste like. He also wondered, if they ever got that far, what effect the sight of the energy shield would have on him. It was a kilometer wide and reached half a kilometer into the sky, big enough to encapsulate all of Owey Island. A gigantic dome that, depending on how the light hit it, was either invisible, shone with the colors of the rainbow, or had the appearance of opaque glass.

Nobody on Earth knew how it was created; indeed, it was not even evident what laws of physics the shield was based on. But two things were certain: it was invincible and it was deadly. Mere contact with it was enough. If they wanted to reach Rhodan, they would have to come up with something that nobody else had thought of. Sid González believed that, thanks to their powers, they could achieve the impossible.

"Wuriu!" the boy screamed, his forehead almost touching the line of stones. "It's your turn!"

The Japanese man closed his eyes and opened his mind. His talent had been described as "scanning." He was able to see through solid matter as if it did not exist, up to a certain distance and a certain thickness.

He dug his fingers into the sand and gave it everything he had. But would it be enough? John Marshall had his doubts. Would the

energy shield act as a barrier to the Japanese man's ability to see through things? It was definitely possible. Indeed, it seemed so likely that even Sid hadn't considered trying to jump *through* the shield.

And even if Wuriu managed to see through it, the ordinary soil of the desert remained an obstacle. Rhodan and his companions had hidden themselves beneath the desert surface, possibly dozens of meters deep. And their hiding place could be anywhere within the circle covered by the Arkonides' protective shield, which had a diameter of one kilometer.

Wuriu's task was clear enough in the obstacle course that Sid had set up for him. Behind the line of stones, he had dug several holes in the sand and then refilled them. The object—-the "treasure" that Wuriu was to find—-was hidden in one of those holes.

The beads of sweat forming on the Japanese man's forehead ran into his eyes. He contorted his face, and the veins in his neck bulged. He bent forward.

Mercant continued shooting, aiming the rubber bullets again and again at the sand to the right and left of the group. They embedded themselves deep in the soil, throwing up small scatterings of dirt each time they hit the ground. It was a clever move. That way they did not put the mutants in danger if Anne's telekinetic shield should become porous. Yet at the same time, the impact of the bullets on the ground was a tough test of their nerves.

"Wuriu, what's going on?" Sid pressed. "We haven't got all day!"

"I...just...need a little more..."

Another shot rang out. It hit Anne's shield and penetrated it. A rubber bullet, pressed flat and robbed of its full force, fell to the ground beside Marshall's head. Anne's strength was nearing its end.

"It's now or never, Wuriu!" Sid roared. "Come on!"

"I'm doing everything I can!" the Japanese man shouted back at him. He held his breath, twisting like a snake in the sand as he

desperately directed his entire concentration inwards.

It wasn't enough. All at once the tension left Wuriu's body. He opened his eyes and tears of rage and shame at his own failure glistened in them

"I'm so sorry, Sid," he panted. "It's not working."

The boy stared at the others for a few seconds, his mouth wide open as if he could not believe what he had just heard. He swallowed loudly. "Don't worry, Wuriu. You'll get there. We're working on it, okay?" He turned around. "John, it's your turn!"

"What?" the telepath asked, surprised. "How so?"

He didn't know what Sid meant. The plan was for Wuriu to find Rhodan or one of his companions. Then they would regroup and combine their mental strength, allowing Marshall to reach out his telepathic antennae and send a message to someone who would open up a gap in the shield. It was a bold plan. And that was putting it mildly.

It was one thing to read minds but quite another to transmit your own thoughts to another person...and yet it didn't seem impossible to Marshall. Nevertheless, it was a distant goal that he hoped to achieve after many years of continuous training. Sid, however, expected him to deliver here and now.

"Read my thoughts!" the boy ordered. "Just for practice."

Marshall obeyed, delving into the teen's mind. He ignored the boy's grim determination and his fear that they might get there too late to rescue Rhodan. But sensing Sid's longing for a different world, a better one, he concentrated on the past few minutes.

John Marshall became Sid. He could feel the grime on his knees, the clammy wetness of it seeping through the fabric of his trousers. He felt the moist sand between his fingers as he dug holes with his bare hands. Finally, he could feel the treasure.

"I have it!" Marshall said, pointing diagonally to the right. "There. The fourth hole you dug."

“You think so? Let’s have a look!”

Sid lifted one of his arms, which was the prearranged signal for Allan Mercant to stop shooting. Then he stood up. Together, they dug where Marshall had pointed.

He had been right. A shiny object became visible in the damp sand. It was a model of one of the Arkonide spaceships—-a sphere with a bulge running around its middle.

“Not bad, huh?” Sid said, suddenly a child again, proud to present his work to the man who was like a father to him. The boy had completed the model in the workshop on Owey Island in a day.

“Yes.”

Marshall wiped the sand off with his sleeve and looked at the intricate model. Sid had searched for photos on the Net and studied them in detail. Shortly after the *Stardust* had landed, an Arkonide ship had appeared above the Gobi and fully destroyed part of the Chinese troops while landing. Supplies and materials had to be brought in for Rhodan. After a brief stay, the ship had ascended into the sky and disappeared.

“It’s my present to you”, the boy announced generously. Then he stood up straight and said, “Let’s try it again! That wasn’t bad for a first attempt, but we need to become better. Much better! Don’t forget, Rhodan needs us! Humanity needs us!”

2.

July 10, 2036

After two days, they examined what was left of the *Stardust*.

The ship had brought Perry Rhodan and his team to the Moon and back to Earth. A tiny step in cosmic dimensions, a mere hop in relative terms, but it had proven to be a leap for humankind that was bigger and bolder than any other since they had left the African steppe behind them and set out to conquer the world.

At least, that was Perry Rhodan's belief. Despite everything.

It took two days before the wreck of the Stardust had cooled down enough to allow people to approach it. They had needed those two days to recover from seeing their dream go up in flames anyway.

Their situation was, as Bull so fittingly remarked, not exactly ideal, but it was stable. The Arkonide energy shield protected them, defending them unwaveringly from every attack by the Chinese troops besieging the landing site. The generator that created the shield worked to perfection and would continue to do so for years or even decades to come, if necessary.

Their supplies were also enough to last for years. Rhodan had managed to pry them from Thora, the commander of the Arkonide ship that had been damaged on the moon. It was the same with the autonomous construction machines that worked tirelessly on the city that Rhodan had called to life: Terrania.

Terrania was to be humanity's gateway to the stars. The capital city of a human race that no longer allowed itself to be shackled by the obsolete misconceptions of nation and skin color, rich and poor, class and social standing; a humanity whose destiny lay among the stars and not on an overpopulated and overstretched Earth.

The autonomous construction machines worked day and night

while the city grew out of the soil of the Gobi desert towards the sky. However, it was at best a Potemkin Village, a mockup of a city.

Terrania was lacking people.

Its inhabitants could be counted on the fingers of one hand. There was Perry Rhodan, former commander of the *Stardust*'s mission to the moon, former astronaut and former citizen of the United States of America. And of course his friend and teammate Reginald Bull, who would never let Rhodan down. The two men were seen as betrayers of humanity. At least in the eyes of the Earth's government, with an unprecedented unanimity.

Clark Flipper, the third member of the crew, had left the landing site shortly after their arrival in the Gobi Desert. Clark had gone off to seek the love of his life, Beth, who had disappeared in the Himalayas. Rhodan and Bull had heard nothing from him since then.

Clark's departure acted as a diversion that their fourth member, Dr. Manoli, had used to make off with Crest, the critically ill Arkonide. Nine days had passed since then, and they hadn't heard a thing from Manoli and Crest either. Did their silence mean that Manoli had managed to save the Arkonide's life and that they were now in hiding? Or had they been taken prisoner? Or were they already long dead?

Rhodan could only guess at what had happened. The Chinese troops had installed strong interfering transmitters, and they prevented the besieged from finding out what was happening outside of the energy shield. However, one piece of news—-one of extreme significance—-had managed to make it through: the Arkonide ship on the moon, the *Aetron*, had been destroyed by astronauts from Earth. And in a strange twist of fate, some of the surviving perpetrators of this attack were now companions of Rhodan and Bull.

Bull had dared to embark on another flight to the Moon to find out about what had happened to the *Aetron*. He discovered the wreckage of the Arkonide ship there—-along with four people who were close to dying of suffocation.

Bull had rescued Conrad Deringhouse, Rod Nyssen, Alexander Baturin and Darja Morosova, filled the loading dock of his ship with wreckage from the *Aetron* that he deemed useful, and flown back to Earth.

The Chinese troops were waiting for the Stardust, and had been unable to withstand their concentrated air defense attacks. It was only thanks to the Arkonide robots, which Perry Rhodan had on board, that Bull and the astronauts had survived. The spacecraft itself had gone up in flames...along with all their hopes. All that remained was to search the burnt wreckage for anything that might be of use.

Reginald Bull shook his head and wiped the sweat from his brow. He stood next to Rhodan amid the ruins of the *Stardust*. "Those idiots! What have they done to our beautiful ship?"

He had taken the shooting down of their craft personally. Bull had almost magical hands when it came to anything technical. When the *Stardust* went down, he lost not only his spaceship but a faithful companion as well.

"The soldiers were afraid," Rhodan said in an attempt to calm his friend.

"Of us?"

Bull straightened, touching the wound he had sustained when they'd crashed. There was another one running diagonally across his forehead above his left eyebrow. They would probably leave scars as a permanent reminder of this bitter day.

"You're not serious. Why would anyone be afraid of us?"

Bull looked down at himself. He wore an Arkonide combat uniform, or rather what was left of it. The fabric was covered in soot and was even singed in some places. The suit's energy supply was depleted, and only a shell remained. But it still had thick soles that were useful for combing through the crash site. Embers still glowed here and there.

“I am absolutely serious,” Rhodan said. “The soldiers are scared. Of us. Of their officers...”

“And the officers in turn are scared of them,” Bull finished. “And they are scared of, and so on and so forth. And everyone says they have their orders to follow, right?” He snorted. “What kind of a sick world do we live in?”

The one we made! was on the tip of Rhodan’s tongue, but Conrad Deringhouse got there first.

“Reg!” he called, “you have to see this!”

The gangly astronaut went to the end of the chain they had formed. He poked about with a stick in a pile of wreckage that was as high as a man.

“I’m coming!” Bull shouted, walking towards him.

Reginald was the “expert” in Arkonide technology. The minute the *Stardust* went down in the dried-out Jouyan salt lake, he had begun playing around with the aliens’ machinery. And now he was the one-eyed man in the land of the blind. A one-eyed man, Rhodan guessed, with a visual capacity of about one percent.

Rhodan followed his friend, as did Rod Nyssen and Alexander Baturin. The Russian, who had wanted to destroy the returning *Stardust* with a bomb, was completely transformed. It was as if he was different person altogether, like someone who had finally come to his senses. His colleague, Darja Morosova, was not at the crash site. She had withdrawn immediately after the rescue operation, and Rhodan let her go. The Russian cosmonaut had a great deal to digest—-all of them did—-and each of them had to find their own way to deal with the events they had been through.

Bull and Deringhouse used the rods in their hands to poke around the mountain of charred wreckage, most of which had been twisted by the heat so much that it was now unidentifiable. Gradually, a pipe-like shape came into sight.

“Hey!” Bull called out. “I’ll be damned if that isn’t...” He let his

rod fall and started digging with his hands. The gloves of the Arkonide spacesuit protected his fingers as he rubbed the soot away, revealing the shiny surface beneath. “The spacedrive! It’s the damned spacedrive!”

Bull was so delighted that Rhodan would not have been the slightest bit surprised to see him kiss the metal surface.

“Help me to get it free!”

Deringhouse, Nyssen and Baturin followed his command. Rhodan was about to join them when he felt a hand on his lower arm. He turned around to see Darja Morosova before him.

“Perry…can I have a quick word with you?” she asked quietly. “Alone?”

“Of course.”

They crossed the crash site and remained standing once they were out of earshot of the others. It wasn’t necessary, as the men were so engrossed in their discovery that they wouldn’t have noticed if the two of them had started screaming at one another.

“I want to apologise to you,” the Russian woman said. “I shouldn’t have snuck off the way I did.”

She was a young woman, but there was always a sad expression in her eyes, telling Rhodan that life had not always been good to her.

“It’s okay. There’s no need to apologise.”

She shook her head. “Yes, there is. If Reginald had not rescued us, I would have been dead.”

“Don’t think twice about it. I’m sure you would have done exactly the same if it had been the other way around.”

She said nothing, just stared shyly at her feet. She had almost suffocated on the moon, and the lack of oxygen had made her drop her defenses and show emotions she would rather have kept to

herself. She knew that Bull had told him about it, and now she was ashamed of herself.

"Come on!" Rhodan said, thinking that she was finished. "Let's join the others. They could use our help."

"In a minute. There's something else I have to say." The Russian woman turned to the side. "I...since landing here, I've had a lot of time to think. I picked out a place where I wouldn't be disturbed."

She pointed to the highest building in the ghost city of Terrania. It was so high that it almost touched the energy shield.

Rhodan smiled. "Undisturbed *and* with a view"

The trace of a smile flickered across her face. "Yes, you can see for kilometers when the sun is at the right angle. And there's a great deal to see. The Chinese, all those people flowing into the Gobi to join you, Perry. In the town I grew up in, there's a tableau with figures made out of tin. It shows the battle against Napoleon at Smolensk. The panorama from up there reminded me of that tableau. Except that the figures were not made of tin; they were real people."

Rhodan nodded. Real people... He never forgot that for a second. People he was responsible for. They had come to the Gobi because he had landed the *Stardust* in the desert, and because he had called on them. In the meantime, they numbered in the hundreds of thousands, crowding together in two circles around the shield. The inner circle was formed by the soldiers, and the outer circle was made up of people from all over the world who were gathering there, hoping to reach Terrania.

"I think the Chinese troops are up to something," Morosova said.

"That wouldn't surprise me. Bai Jun is a cunning devil." Rhodan had learned very quickly that the general who commanded the Chinese troops was not to be underestimated. "I would be more worried if he wasn't up to something. But we have nothing to fear, Darja. The energy shield can't be defeated by Earthly technology."

“The Arkonides on the Moon thought that as well.”

“We don’t know exactly how the *Aetron* was destroyed. I presume the Arkonides, believing themselves to be far superior to us humans, neglected to set up the protective shield and left Michael Freyt and Gleb Jakunin in their ship.”

“Probably.” Darja was part of the commando squad that had attacked the *Aetron*. She and her companions had survived because they had remained outside of the volcano in which the ship had landed. “But what if the Chinese decide to use atomic weapons?”

“They won’t do that. Not as long as the siege lasts. They would have hundreds of thousands of deaths on their conscience.

“Not for much longer.” Her voice was suddenly very flat.

Rhodan looked at her inquisitively. “Are the troops driving the people away?”

“No. They people are leaving of their own free will.”

“But why? There’s no reason for them to leave!” Or was there? The interfering transmitter closed them off from what was going on in the world. What on Earth was happening out there?

“I have an idea,” Darja said. She dragged her foot across the ground, stirring up a cloud of bone-dry dust in the process. “This is a desert. Nobody can stand it here for very long unless they are getting supplies from outside. The Chinese troops were in charge of those supplies. Until now, that is. They’ve cut off the supplies and the people out there are running out of water...”

Leaving them with no choice but to flee the desert. Rhodan thought back on his last encounter with the general, at the energy shield. “I will now do what it is my obligation to do as the commanding officer of the forces here,” Bai Jun had said, and then he’d left. Rhodan sensed what the General was hinting at, but he had refused to believe it. Bai Jun was attacking him with a weapon from which no Arkonide technology, no matter how superior, could protect him: his own conscience.

“Thank you, Darja. We owe you.”

The cosmonaut blushed. “Don’t think twice about it. I’m sure you would have done exactly the same if it was the other way around.” She smiled in an attempt to hide her shyness.

“Hey, you two!” Bull called from the wreckage. “Come here! You have to see this!”

“We’re coming!” Rhodan answered. He reached out to take Darja’s hand, to take her with him.

She hesitated. “What do you want to do?”

“The same as you did: think things over. And then do the same as always: the best we can with what we have!”

They crossed the crash site and stopped next to Bull. The pile of smoking, steaming wreckage had been removed revealing several meters of pipes below, each of them as long as a man was tall.

“The Arkonide spacedrive!” Bull couldn’t stand still. He shifted his weight continuously from one foot to the other. “And it works! Can you believe it, Perry? These white-haired couch potatoes are more capable than you might think!”

Darja, who was still not familiar with Bull’s impulsive manner, followed the astronaut’s dance of joy with skeptical eyes.

“It’s only a spacedrive,” she said. “What use is that to us?”

Bull paused for a second before winking cheekily at the Russian with the words: “Oh…nothing special. It’ll just help us save the world. As usual.”

3.

Past

The morning sun climbed above the concrete wall of the Joint Security Station in the south of Sadr City, blinding Private Clifford Monterny.

Monterny, who was sitting in the Humvee with the door open, looked at the clock. It told him that it was 9.37 in the morning on August 17, 2007. A day in Iraq like any other. It was hot. And they were still waiting for the order to get moving.

"Shit!" the marksman Sanders cursed. "When are we finally going to get going? We'll hit the midday heat!"

"And? *You* have a place in the fresh air!"

Sanders mumbled something, but his words were drowned out by the spluttering of the diesel engine. He swung the turret to the side. Seven vehicles were waiting to leave the Joint Security Station to do their daily work.

Monterny pulled a chocolate bar out of his pocket and took a bite out of it. He didn't feel like eating, but he needed something to pass the time. He hadn't intended to be so hard on Sanders. The marksman was a good guy. Helpful. Always good for a laugh—-as long as he didn't have to go out on patrol. Sanders was just scared. He didn't want to go out. But he had no choice. Day after day. Which made him nervous. You only had to touch him on the shoulder to make him flare up. When they were in the station, it was only a matter of cursing, but out on the streets of Baghdad, he had his finger permanently on the trigger.

They had managed to keep him under control so far, but Monterny doubted they would be able to do it for much longer. Sanders was getting worse the closer it came to the end of his tour. Another ninety-nine days. And with every day that his return home got closer, his fear seemed to become greater.

Monterny stood up and walked around the Humvee. He was already really hot, and the real heat had not yet set in. The protective vests were crucial, but the material didn't allow any moisture to get out. And on top of that, he never managed to put the vest on in a way that prevented his back from fighting against the pain caused by the weight of it within half an hour. The vehicle was supposed to offer protection, but the Humvee's armor was improvised and only shielded them from machine gun fire.

Ivanovich Goratchin sat in the dust that seemed to cover everything in this country. He leaned on the back tire and read. Monterny could make out a dragon on the cover of his book and a knight who was boldly facing the monster. A fantasy novel. Ivan got his nickname from his love of such stories, and everyone called him "Ivanhoe." One of the slightly more educated guys had given him the name and it had stuck.

Monterny had pointed out that "Ivanhoe" was not actually a fantasy story but a historical novel. Nobody cared. And Ivanovich, the child of Russian immigrants who devoured everything his new world had to offer, cared least of all. In fact, quite the opposite was true: he loved the nickname and wore it like a badge of honor. He finally had a name that his comrades could pronounce properly without making fun of him. An American name, even if it originated from a Scottish novel. He was like everyone else at last.

And yet Ivanhoe was anything but like the others. He was a giant, almost six foot six. While at first glance he came across as a superficial sunny boy, he had a depth that you would not expect from a twenty-year-old. Ivanhoe would have loved nothing more than to complete the patrols on foot. He spent two hours every day learning Arabic with Monterny.

Monterny wanted to sit down beside him in the dust. but changed his mind at the last minute. Ivanhoe was engrossed in another, better world, and he didn't want to disturb him. He stood there for a few seconds, envious of his companion's ability to be somewhere far away in his mind, before turning around and walking to the gate. The waiting got on his nerves. He couldn't just stand around doing nothing.

“What’s up?” he asked the soldiers who were lucky enough to be on guard duty this week. “Why aren’t you going?”

“Number six won’t start.”

The guard duty was actually supposed to be done by the Iraqi soldiers they shared the Joint Security Station with. But nobody would have been crazy enough to let the Iraqis guard the gate. They were human too, but they sometimes seemed very alien to Monterny, as if they were from another planet. It was very hard not to second-guess them.

“Why? Have the mechanics not had a look at it?”

Every evening, after returning from patrol, the Humvees went into the workshop where the mechanics did any necessary repairs and counted the scratches on the armor that came from gunfire. Their counts were entered into the reports so that those who fought the war on their computer screens could assess the situation.

“Yeah, they did.” The soldier shrugged his shoulders. “Too much heat, too much dust and sand.”

“Too badly treated,” Monterny added. The Humvees were much like the men who drove them. They were at their limit.

“What’s on today’s schedule?” the soldier asked, as if he didn’t already know. He realized Monterny was making conversation to take his mind off things.

“The usual. Tour through Sadr City.”

“Things’ll go ok. It’s too hot today, even for the Iraqis.”

“Hopefully.” Monterny took a slug from his water bottle. He suppressed the urge to drink more. It was bad enough sitting in the airless Humvee for hours without your bladder making things even more unbearable. And getting out to relieve yourself was out of the question.

“And it’s Friday. Fridays are quiet.”

“Mostly.” But sometimes not. Sometimes it seemed as if the insurgents used the day off to gather and carry out concentrated hits.

“Hey, Clifford!” a voice called. “We’re moving!”

It was Ivanhoe. He had stood up and was waving to Monterny.

“Good luck!” the guard said to him, stepping aside to open the gates for the convoy.

Sanders was hissing more than whistling a song by Eminem as Monterny got into the Humvee. Ivanhoe was already in the passenger seat. “Everything okay?” he asked.

“Sure. As always.”

Monterny shifted the Humvee into gear and drove off. He steered them across the front area of the base, driving in a zigzag between concrete barriers that were supposed to prevent suicide bombers from getting through the gate. A vast area full of ruins lay ahead of them. A deserted suburb of Sadr City. Uninhabited.

“Left or right?” he asked.

The patrol drove along the same route every day. The only variable was the direction in which they covered it.

It was madness. They couldn’t have made it easier for the insurgents if they tried. But the orders from above were clear: it was important to show their presence, and to give the population a feeling of security and stability.

Officially, that was. Unofficially, every soldier in the unit knew what the purpose of the patrols was. They were to draw fire. In this war, the opponent was invisible. So they presented themselves in order to find targets for their own far superior firepower.

Sanders bent down. “Stop fooling around!” he snarled. “You know exactly what direction we want to drive in so that we can get rid of Ivanhoe’s stupid sneakers!”

Ivanhoe ignored him. “To the right” was all he said.

“Okay!”

Monterny steered the Humvee onto the four-lane road: a relict from Iraq’s golden seventies when the oil money hadn’t yet been wasted on paying for the military and the luxurious lifestyle of the elite. None of the lampposts on the central reservation worked anymore. Not even when electricity was available.

Monterny accelerated. Speed meant safety. The Iraqi vehicles swerved to the right as soon as they noticed the convoy, giving themselves the chance to fall back. Nobody in their right mind wanted to get too close to the Americans.

Sanders was constantly in motion, swiveling his machine gun from left to right. Ivanhoe was silent, peering concentratedly towards the side of the road. They knew every bush, every heap of trash along the route, which was vital if they wanted to survive. Every change meant danger. It could point towards an improvised explosive device just waiting for the convoy.

As usual, there were five of them. But Baines and McEvoy had called in sick. Food poisoning.

“Damned cowards!” was all Sanders had muttered when he had been notified. Ivanhoe had to suppress a smile. Having another two comrades along for the ride would not have benefitted them in any way, but having two less meant more space for all his shoes.

The broadened road narrowed down to two lanes. A wall made of concrete elements rose up to the left, four meters high. Its irregular form revealed the haste with which it had been constructed. It separated the poor Shiites of Sadr City from their Sunni countrymen in hopes of preventing them from attacking one another.

Monterny fidgeted in the driver’s seat, looking for a position that approached some form of bearable for his back. He was sweating. The sun had begun to heat up the Humvee.

The road became narrower as the buildings on the right extended towards it, and he was forced to slow down a little. They passed a place where the asphalt and the wall were blackened. An improvised explosive device had been waiting for the evening patrol there two weeks ago. The burned-out vehicles had been removed within the hour. Scenes like that were bad for morale.

The cracks in the asphalt caused by the heat of the blast remained. Nobody in Iraq had either the money or the patience to carry out those kinds of repairs.

The Humvee rolled over a bump in the road, making it buck, when Sanders suddenly cried out, “Hey, what the hell are you doing?”

What was going on? Monterny tried to turn his head, but his helmet made it impossible to turn all the way back.

“Get that shit outta here!” Sanders roared.

“Chill!” Ivanhoe answered. He pulled himself up in the passenger seat, turned round to face the back of the vehicle, and started working on Sanders’ boots.

“Filthy sneakers!” the marksmen shouted, practically foaming at the mouth. “For filthy kids.”

Monterny understood what had happened. One of Ivanhoe’s bundles of shoes had become tangled between Sanders’, getting in his way.

“They can’t do anything about the dirt” Ivanhoe said as he wrestled with the pile. “They’re only kids.”

“Precisely. And we shouldn’t give a damn about them!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

The Russian managed to loosen the bundle and sank back into the passenger seat. He held a shoe in his hand, a beach sandal made of plastic. When Ivanhoe had realized that the children in Sadr City were even more crazy about shoes than they were about candy,

he'd had a mountain of them sent in from the UAE. Paid for with his own money. He wanted to distribute the shoes at the end of the patrol in an open square where they could risk making a stop.

The shoes were the reason they were driving in a clockwise direction.

"And you don't know what you're doing!" Sanders screamed at him. "Your obsession with shoes is insane!"

Insane... Yes, you could see it that way. Or quite the opposite—-courage. Ivanovich Goratchin was the bravest man Monterny had ever met. He seemed to know no fear. He was the only soldier at the base apart from Monterny himself who didn't need to take medications to stop himself from going crazy.

"I'm only doing what we're here to do!" Ivanhoe shouted at him. "I'm helping!" Fury caused a vein to pop out on his forehead. He was the gentlest person Clifford had ever met, but when he got angry, it was a burning hot rage.

"You'll get us all killed! You..."

"Enough, already!" Monterny bellowed before Ivanhoe's fury could get the better of him. "Please! We have to concentrate, otherwise we'll all get killed. Okay?"

They stopped arguing immediately. It seldom worked, but it was an unusual talent that Monterny had. Sometimes, when it really mattered, he could be persuasive. Extremely persuasive. And this was a moment when it mattered.

Monterny pressed the brakes of the Humvee, reducing the vehicle's speed to almost walking pace, and turned off into the labyrinth of flat, dirty buildings that made up Sadr City. It was a slum. The road was not paved, so the ride became bumpy. Dusty at the edges, the it had an exposed, stinking sewage canal in the middle. The soldiers had once given it the name "Hearts and Minds Alley," and it had stuck.

This is where the Iraqis were, the people they had liberated.

Here were the hearts they wanted to win over, the minds they wanted to convince.

Nobody paid them any notice. It was as if the locals had collectively decided the Americans had become as inevitable in their lives as the heat, the dryness, and the blackouts.

Or was it all a pretense?

“Faster!” Sanders gasped. He swivelled his heavy machine gun from side to side without pause, past the people who were out shopping or just standing around in small groups, waiting for the day to end. Every single one of them could be an enemy.

“I can’t!” Monterny answered. “It’s too narrow here!” He had one hand on the horn all the time, but nobody seemed to care. Cars, makeshift carriages pulled by donkeys, pedestrians—-they left hardly any space for the Humvee, which was forced to proceed at an unbearably slow pace.

“That’s not our problem! Push them out of the way!”

“No!”

Sanders cursed, but he left it at that. There was nothing he could do.

The crowd became even denser, and Monterny slowed to a crawl. Locals pushed their way past the vehicle. Close enough to touch and yet so far away. Ivanhoe lifted his hand and greeted the people outside, even though nobody responded to the gesture.

Monterny followed his example. He greeted them and smiled, pushing down the fear as best he could. He had read somewhere that smiling helped to lighten your mood. The movement of the muscles triggered an impulse that led the brain to release neurotransmitters. These made it easier to smile, which in turn released more neurotransmitters, and so on and so on ...

It seemed to be working.

His fear died away. The people out there on the other side of the

bulletproof glass were only human, just like he was, he told himself. He had nothing to be afraid of. They just wanted to get on with their lives. To be left in peace.

No one interfered with the patrol. The crowd gradually began to thin out as the end of the street came into view. They recognized it when they saw the six-story apartment block.

Monterny accelerated.

“Finally!” Sanders blurted out. “But next time—-”

His words were cut off by a huge blast. The road behind the Humvee exploded. The shock wave caught the heavy vehicle throwing it forward. Pieces of wreckage, stones, and earth rained down on its armor and windows.

Monterny turned the wheel violently to one side, to prevent the Humvee from ramming into the wall of a building. In his rearview mirror, Monterny could see the second Humvee in the convoy emerge from the cloud of smoke and dust. After that...nothing.

An explosive device.

The hail became weaker and then stopped. For a second there was complete silence, and it felt to Monterny as if time stood still. It was like watching one of the numerous videos on YouTube that soldiers sometimes uploaded. As if he was merely looking on and not actually involved.

That was an illusion. Debris started pelting them again. Gunfire ricocheted off the Humvee’s armor.

“Shit!” Sanders fired. The hammering sound of his heavy machine gun drowned out all other noise.

Monterny suddenly remembered his training. Speed. Speed meant safety. He pressed down hard on the gas pedal, and the Humvee sped forward. Next to him, Ivanhoe was screaming into the radio.

The street was deserted. The end of the alleyway surged rapidly

towards them. One last bottleneck where two buildings protruded out into the street, and then they would be out of there.

Monterny stared at the road, looking for a second explosive device. The insurgents were clever. They knew how to rattle a patrol. Over there, at the tight spot in the middle. What was it?

“Clifford, halt!” Ivanhoe hollered.

Monterny, who trusted his comrade blind, put his foot on the brake. The Humvee, its tires blocked, skidded along the alley before coming to a standstill.

Sanders was so surprised that he stopped firing. “What the hell? We have to get out of here!”

“Sanders, it’s a kid!” Ivanhoe answered.

The child was lying in the middle of the road, blocking their path. He wasn’t moving, and he was lying in a pool of dark liquid. Was it blood? Or just dirty water?

Sanders turned his machine gun in the direction they were driving in. “Keep driving, Cliff!”

Monterny shook his head. “Are you off your head?”

“The kid’s been hit! Otherwise he would have long since run away like everyone else. Get going!”

“No...no. I can’t!”

“You have to! We can’t stay here. It’s a trap! We—-”

Without saying a word, Ivanhoe threw the door open, jumped out onto the street, and ran to the child.

“Shit!” Sanders yelled. “Come back, Ivanhoe!”

The Russian reached the child and bent over to lift him up.

“Shit! What the hell!” Sanders hollered, shooting over their

comrade's head to give him cover.

It wasn't enough. Dust flew upward as bullets tore into the ground. One of them hit Ivanhoe at the very moment he wanted to run back to the Humvee with the lifeless child in his arms. He fell to the ground.

"Shit! What did I say? It's a trap!" Sanders continued firing, aiming at a building where the gunfire seemed to be coming from.

Monterny's heart was hammering. There was no way back and no way forward. And Ivanhoe was injured. There was only one thing to do. He threw open the door, ignoring Sanders' yells, and ran to Ivanhoe and the child.His comrade was alive. The bullet had hit him in the upper thigh.

"Don't move!" Monterny shoved his arms unter Ivanhoe's armpits, his plan being to drag the wounded man back to the Humvee. He only managed it a centimeter at a time. Ivanhoe was heavy, and their equipment weighed a lot as well.

Add to that the child that Ivanhoe was still gripping tightly. It was a boy. He was limp and his T-shirt was soaked in blood at his left hip. Was it the boy's blood? Or had it come from Ivanhoe's wound?

"Let him go!" Monterny hissed.

"No!"

"I'll come back and get him as soon as we get you into the Humvee, Ivanhoe. Let him go! Please!"

Sanders continued firing, shooting holes in the facades and causing little whirlwinds of sand. He was keeping the attackers at bay, but not completely. Random shots hit the Humvee or slammed into the road. Any one of their team could be hit at any time.

A new sound could suddenly be heard within the symphony of noises: the drone of rotors. It was the helicopter gunships that Ivanhoe had requested. The Apaches circled above the city just waiting for an opportunity like this.

“No! Out of the question!” Ivanhoe held the child even tighter. He was furious. His eyes burned with anger, staring intently at the house where the gunfire was coming from. It was almost as if Ivanhoe believed he could destroy the building with sheer willpower.

And then it happened.

When they were about halfway back to the Humvee, the building exploded in a ball of flames. One of the Apaches must have had it in its sights and fired a rocket at it.

Sanders let out a sharp scream while Monterny dragged Ivanhoe and the child across the street. They reached the vehicle unharmed and Monterny tore open the door.

“We’re just about there! Keep going, Ivanhoe!”

Then the second explosive device blew up.

4.

July 7, 2036

There were eight of them.

Eight people in a drafty cottage from the last century but one, named after some obscure musician from the same era, once a home to fishermen who made a meagre living on Owey Island. Huddled close together around an open peat fire, without which the cold evening temperatures in June were unbearable.

Eight people out of more than eight billion. Eight people who were committed to achieving only one goal: Save the world. Make it a better place forever. But how?

Sid González was plagued by feelings of doubt. He just had to rescue the man who had opened the gateway to the stars wide for humanity. The man who had entered into a fairytale-like friendship with the Arkonides—-Perry Rhodan.

The boy was soaked through with a mixture of sweat, damp sand, and rain. He had been practising the attack all day with John, Anne, Ras and Wuriu, over and over again until the onset of darkness had forced them to stop for the day.

Usually, Sid would have been sitting on his chair, hunched up in exhaustion, but he could hardly sit still. He ate from the hearty stew that Homer G. Adams had cooked with an eagerness that had surprised Marshall. And when Sid was not chewing, he talked.

"...need to stay closer together! The smaller the telekinetic shield you have to pull over us, Anne, the more stable it will be and the less energy it will cost you!"

Sid's eyes sparkled in the light thrown by the flickering flames of the peat fire. If John Marshall didn't know better, he would have thought it was caused by fever.

"...you can achieve a lot more, Ras! Your jumping technique isn't perfect. We'll practice together tomorrow, okay?"

"...don't worry, Wuriu, you're getting there! It'll be fine! You already made a real improvement this afternoon!"

"...and maybe John can speak to Rhodan telepathically, without having to actually have him in sight. What do you think, John?"

Marshall muttered something unintelligible. He could read other people's minds with some effort. That was all. And Sid knew that. What the boy had said was foolish, on one hand.

On the other hand, the boy's excitement fired him on. Sid González had changed, to an extent that felt to Marshall as if years had passed since the teen had kidnapped him and Sue while escaping from the police in Houston instead of a little over two weeks ago. The chubby teenager Marshall had known no longer existed. Sid was slim and sinewy. It was very difficult to tell how old he was, but he was no longer a child. He had become a man.

John thought back to the nickname the other street kids in the shelter had given Sid: Spark. It had to do with the sparks that surrounded him when he teleported. But that was only part of the reason. Sid also had a spark within, and he had the habit of infecting other people with it, motivating them.

But there were exceptions.

Allan Mercant looked up from his cup of steaming hot tea. "Let it go, Sid."

The former Homeland Security agent said it in the tone of a strict father. At sixty-five, he was old enough to be the boy's grandfather. His comment tore Sid out of his enthusiastic mood.

"Let what go, Allan?" he asked. His tone with the older man was one of equals, and he held Mercant's gaze. Both of these were things the old Sid would not have had the courage to do. But the old Sid no longer existed. With the help of Marshall and the other mutants, he had relived his childhood traumas and left them behind him.

“Your fantastic tales. They’re nice to listen to, but—-and even if it pains you to hear this—-they’re nothing but dreams.” Mercant had wrapped both hands around his cup to warm his fingers.

“Dreams? Why?”

“Your so-called plan isn’t a plan.”

“Then what is it?”

“Wishful thinking.”

“You...”

Sid stopped mid-sentence. He was shaking with rage. Suddenly, the air began to crackle as his power was activated. The boy was ready to run away in order to escape this public admonition. Or, John thought, to attack Allan Mercant—-something he was certain this new Sid González was perfectly capable of.

“I’m not trying to get at you.” Mercant sipped from his cup, unmoved by the boy’s reaction. He did not seem to be aware of the threat in front of him. Either that or it left him cold. “On the contrary, Sid, I have nothing but good intentions. I spent decades in the secret service. And do you know what agents spend their time doing? Writing reports that nobody reads and making plans.”

“So?!” The boy blinked. He knew he wouldn’t like what the old agent had to say. “What’s wrong with making plans?”

“Nothing. Only that you have to be damn careful. You must never forget that a plan only represents a reflection of reality. An incomplete picture with gaps in it. People forget that far too often. There is a common goal, so everyone sits down together, thinks things over, throws ideas around...and before you know it the facts have been distorted to such an extent that they fit in with what you want. People forget that the plan *has to be* incomplete. Ultimately, they go out there, put the plan into action, and run into a wall. If they’re lucky, all they get is a kick in the pants and learn something they can use next time around. But if they’re unlucky, there is no next time.”

“Which is exactly why we’re practicing. So we don’t run into a wall!” Sid pointed out of the tiny window towards the beach. “And you even helped us! Why do that when you don’t believe our plan will work?”

“To give you all a chance to learn something.”

“And we did! We’ve become much better! In one single afternoon! You saw it with your own eyes, didn’t you?”

Mercant nodded. “Yes, you all got better. And you have my full respect for that. You did unbelievable things. Things I would have dismissed as esoteric nonsense a few weeks ago.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“It’s as simple as this: unbelievable is not enough.”

Mercant put the cup down beside him. He still had the demeanour of a pensioner enjoying the calm pace of retirement chatting to some friends about the world and his wife. The agent must have taken part in hundreds of discussions like this.

“Your obstacle course is an excellent idea, Sid,” he continued, “but not for practising an attack on the energy shield in the Gobi. Carrying out an attack like that is impossible. I admit you have reached the stage where you can overcome the obstacle course without a hitch. But that’s not enough. The dimensions are just not right. The real distances are three times as long, perhaps four times. And the people waiting for you in no man’s land will not be shooting rubber bullets at the sand. They’ll be letting off thousands of live rounds.”

Mercant was right. Marshall knew it. And he could easily have continued with the list of objections. The old agent had seen too many plans fail to have any illusions. And then there was also Mercant’s spooky talent of being able to look at the facts and tell the way something was going to go.

Sid knew this just as well as Marshall did, but he didn’t want to hear it.

“We’ll be careful! When we arrive in the Gobi, we’ll check out exactly what the situation’s like on the ground. If our plan turns out to be unrealistic, we’ll drop it.”

“You don’t even believe that yourself. *I* wouldn’t be able to do that. Just imagine, you finally manage to reach the Gobi, and there’s the energy shield glinting in the sun, close enough to touch...”

“You’re underestimating us, Allan! We—-”

“Are normal human beings,” Mercant cut in, “despite our unusual powers.”

Sid shook his head defiantly. “We’ll manage it! You’ll see!”

Allan Mercant said nothing. For a few seconds, there was an oppressive silence among the eight of them as they sat in a semi-circle around the fireplace. Then Homer G. Adams cleared his throat.

It was thanks to Adams that they were able to sit here in this cottage together and argue with one another. Without him and the seemingly endless resources of his General Cosmic Company, Marshall would currently be sitting in a cell in the Ministry of Homeland Security, as would Sue, Sid and Mercant.

“Just suppose you managed to get through,” Adams suggested. He leaned back in his armchair but gave the impression that he was leaning forward because of the hump growing from his back. “Suppose you manage to get through to Rhodan. What then?”

Sid winced as if the old man—-Adams was in his mid-seventies —-had punched him.

“What do you think we can achieve in the Gobi?” Adams continued. “Rhodan is trapped. Escape is almost impossible. There is nothing left of the *Stardust* but a smoking pile of wreckage. He cannot expect any help from the Arkonides. The big ship on the moon has been destroyed, even though we don’t know how it happened. And Crest, the Arkonide? He hasn’t been seen in days.

He might even be dead. He looked like a very sick man in the video footage. An Earthly virus might already have finished him off." Adams fixed his gaze on the boy. "So what do you hope to achieve in the Gobi?"

"I... I... Rhodan said we should come!" Sid stuttered. He obviously hadn't thought about that. "In his big speech! The City of Terrania! The gateway to the stars!"

"Terrania is a ghost town. A dream we all hope will become reality one day."

"Exactly! It's up to us to fill it with life!"

"And we will. I promise you, and I am a man who is in the habit of keeping his promises."

Even more than that, Marshall thought, he a man who was damned to keep his promises. Homer G. Adams had a photographic memory. He never forgot anything, even if he wanted to. A man like that had no choice but to live up to his ideals if he didn't want to doubt them.

"Sid," he implored, "we will help Rhodan. But is us becoming prisoners of a captive the best way to do that? I don't think so."

Sid struggled with himself. "But what else should we do?"

"Wait."

"Wait? They'll kill Rhodan and his companions!"

"I don't think that's very likely. A dead Rhodan would cause a great number of problems for the heads of state on Earth. He is worth a great deal more to them alive. Perry Rhodan has established contact with the Arkonides. We can only guess at what secrets they have revealed to him...which is why we must wait until an opportunity to attack presents itself. And when that time comes, we will be able to put our powers to good use."

Adams was a very astute man, and his argument was flawless. Marshall had to admit he was right, even if he wished it were not

so. Waiting meant remaining powerless onlookers of a drama that could very well end in tragedy.

Sid González saw it exactly the way he did. The boy's head swiveled back and forth as if seeking eye contact in a bid to find someone who would agree to his plan, which, deep down, he knew full well was not a plan but a very strong urge to finally do something about the situation.

"I'm going to the Gobi!" he declared out loud. "I'm going to Rhodan! I'm not going to sit on this barren island freezing to death while I twiddle my thumbs." His eyes scanned the others. "Who's coming with me?"

Adams and Mercant shook their heads. But Anne and Wuriu stared back at Sid and nodded. They were inspired by his spark.

Sid's gaze wandered over to Marshall, but the telepath was unable to hold the boy's gaze. His common sense told him it was better to wait, although the thought of sitting around doing nothing drove him just as crazy as it did Sid. And even more unbearable was the idea of letting the boy go it alone. Sid was still a child, even if he no longer looked like one. He needed somebody who would have his back. He needed John Marshall.

Marshall nodded.

Sid grinned with a mixture of relief and joy. His gaze wandered farther. "Ras, what about you?"

"I'm staying." The Sudanese turned away, saying, "But that is no great loss for you, Sid. My powers are too weak to be of any real help to your plan. I'm going to stay here and practice...until my moment comes."

Sid was silent for a moment. "We'll miss you, Ras. In the Gobi..."

"And what about me?" a weak, high-pitched voice interrupted.

Sue. The girl had jumped up from her chair and was now stretching. It wasn't a good move, as all that did was emphasize her frail and childlike physique.

“What about you, Sue?” Sid asked.

“I want to come with you to the Gobi!”

“What for? We don’t need you for my plan.”

The girl placed her left hand and the stump of her other arm on her hips. “Your wonderful plan has just been ripped to shreds, if you ask me. When we get to the Gobi, we’ll need a new one. And anyway, a place on your team just came up for grabs. Or not?” Sue looked towards Ras Tschubai, who moved uncomfortably back and forth in his seat.

“You’re not a teleporter.”

“So what? I have other qualities!”

Sid considered what she had said and then made a decision. “Okay, you’re on board. On one condition.”

“Yes?”

“You don’t get in the way.”

Sue jumped into the air and screamed for joy as if she hadn’t heard his hurtful words.

Sid turned to Adams. “And the General Cosmic Company will be helping us to get there?”

“Of course.” Homer G. Adams gave him a mischievous grin. The old man suddenly looked like a young boy who had just dreamed up another escapade. “After all, our job at GCC is to make the impossible possible!”

5.

The Past

"Clifford, what's your mother's name?"

"R... Ro...sa...lie." He had difficulty pronouncing the name. In fact, he had difficulty pronouncing any words with more than one syllable. Sometimes it was just plain impossible.

"And your father?"

"Kurt."

Julie Ledge smiled at him approvingly and ticked the box on the form she had attached to her clipboard. "And your mother's maiden name?"

"Gi... Giaconda."

"Correct!" The therapist noded. As usual. Julie Ledge came into the room at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center that Monterny shared with two other wounded soldiers every day. She stayed for an hour, and her job was to help him go back to being the Clifford Monterny he once was.

This was one battle he was afraid of. A battle he waited for during the other twenty-three hours a day. He had no choice in the matter. Clifford Monterny was unable to get out of bed. It already made him feel nauseous when he tried to sit up too fast. The thought of standing on his own two legs seemed as bizarre a notion to him as floating in mid-air by the power of his own will.

He shared the room with two of his comrades. However, they did not keep him company. They couldn't. Scrag had had his right leg and arm torn off by an explosion in northern Iraq. The medication he was given to dull the pain also dulled his mind. Bosley's body, on the other hand, was almost completely undamaged. Except for his skull, which was fully covered in bandages, its rear half missing.

He lay there in an artificial coma.

Monterny had it better than they did. His limbs were all there and he was only missing a small piece of his skull. The army surgeon in Iraq had cut it out to relieve the pressure exerted by his swollen brain. They would reimplant it again soon. Then he would be back to his old self, the doctors promised.

He had actually been pretty lucky, Clifford Monterny told himself. But that didn't really help, as nothing was good anymore. There was a huge gaping hole in him. A hole that was empty and bottomless and at the same time filled with unspeakable pain.

"What's your brother's name?" the therapist asked.

Brother? Did he have a brother? He couldn't remember. But he must have one, mustn't he? Otherwise Julie wouldn't have asked him. She wouldn't play games with him, would she? She wasn't allowed to do that. But what if she was? He was completely helpless.

Clifford Monterny. He held on tightly to his name. He was Clifford Monterny. Or was that only a name they had given him? Was...?

"Clifford?" She bent over slightly in his direction. She smelled sweet. He liked the way Julie smelled and decided he would ask her what deodorant she used sometime. "Is everything okay? Can you keep going?"

"Ye... Yes."

She studied him for a moment, considered, and then asked him, "Your brother, Clifford. Do you remember his name?"

"Yes. Of... Of course. His name... His name is..." He stopped. No name came into his head. But there had to be a name in there somewhere. His brother. How could he have forgotten his own brother? He remembered him, didn't he? A gangly boy on the swing next to him. They pushed one another, swinging ever wilder.

What was his name? His name! His name, his name, his name!

Monterny looked at Julie, saw pity in her eyes. It made him angry. Unbelievably angry. “You’re playing with me!” he gasped, and the words suddenly flowed effortlessly from his mouth. “I don’t have a brother! You made him up!”

She shook her head slowly. “He visited you, Clifford. Last week, with your parents. They brought you flowers and a laptop.” She pointed towards the half-wilted bouquet standing on the night table beside his bed as if it were irrefutable evidence.

“Why do I know nothing about that?” Monterny had a strong urge to shove the vase to the floor. But he felt dizzy.

“Because you’ve been severely wounded, Clifford. You suffered a brain trauma. Difficulty speaking and gaps in your memory are a normal symptom of an injury of that kind. But the memories usually return after a few months.”

“That’s what you say!”

“That’s the way it is. I’m not a doctor, but in my time here at the Walter Reed Medical Center, I have seen many patients, Clifford. It is a long and difficult path. But you’ll see, your memories will return. You mustn’t give up!”

“It’s easy for you to say that!” The way she lectured him kept his anger from subsiding. “You just sit there on the chair next to my bed bombarding me with questions! You want to know everything about me but tell me nothing about yourself!”

“It’s not about me, Clifford.” She stiffened a little and moved a few inches away from him.

That hurt him even more. Julie was only a little older than he was, and she was pretty. With long, dark hair and brown eyes. Just his type. If he had seen her in an earlier life in a bar or a club, he would have gone up and spoken to her. Monterny was famous for his bravado with women. His charming manner was a winner, and few women could resist his endearing smile. And those who did soon caved to the disarming way he had.

But that was then. And things would never be the same.

"Yeah, it's about me, is it? Then why don't you help me?" Monterny knew he was being unfair and that Julie put a great deal of effort into her work with him, and that he already had a lot to thank her for. But there was this pain in him and it wasn't lessening, and it demanded that somebody be blamed for this. Anybody. And Julie was the only person he had.

"I am helping you, Clifford."

"You're lying!"

"Why should I lie?"

"So why won't you tell me what happened to me?"

"I've already told you several times. You were seriously wounded in Sadr City, a district of Baghdad. An improvised explosive device caused you to experience severe brain trauma."

"I can't remember any explosion."

"That's normal. Your mind is protecting you. The memory will come back. You have to be patient."

"Patient! Always patient." Monterny could still remember being on patrol that day. *The heat in the Humvee. Sanders yelling at Ivanhoe when his feet got caught up in the shoes. The alleyway—-"Hearts and Minds Alley"—then the explosive device that hit the third Humvee in the convoy. His foot on the gas pedal. Get away, out of here. Ivanhoe's scream of "Clifford, stop!" The child lying motionless on the road. Ivanhoe running suddenly towards the child, picking him up in his arms. And then...nothing.*

"What happened to the kid? Is he alive?"

"I don't know," Julie answered. "The report for Baghdad that day doesn't mention a wounded child."

"Sanders? What happened to Sanders?"

“You wrote an email to him, Clifford. On the laptop your family brought you.”

Had it really come from his family? It was true that Monterny had suddenly found himself in possession of a laptop. It had taken him two days to type the short email. Every letter was a challenge, and it took all the energy he had to get the task done. Julie had found out the address of the marksman and shown him where the “Send” button was.

“Why hasn’t Sanders answered?”

“He’s in action. He...”

“No,” he interrupted her. “He’s no longer in Iraq. He only had another ninety-nine days to go.” He knew with absolute certainty that he was right. That should have made him feel better, but in reality it made him feel even more desperate. He remembered how many days his comrade had to serve but couldn’t remember his own brother’s name?

“It doesn’t necessarily mean anything,” Julie said. “Perhaps your comrade is taking a time off? Far away from it all?

Monterny shook his head. All of a sudden he felt extremely nauseous, and it made him gag. He took a deep breath and waited for the feeling to go away. Then he said, “Sanders wouldn’t survive a single day without the Internet!”

“Could be. But what if he doesn’t have access at the moment?”

Then he would do everything he could to get it! Monterny thought to himself. But he didn’t say the words out loud. Sanders was important to him, but something else was bothering him

“Ivanhoe! What’s with him?”

The therapist shrugged. “You wrote him an email as well. Just like Sanders.”

“He hasn’t answered.”

“Clifford, that doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

“Yes, it does!”

“Why do you think that? Corporal Gorachin is—-”

“Ivanhoe *is* no more!” he interrupted her.

“What do you mean?”

“I searched the entire Internet for him. Everywhere. His Myspace page is gone! It’s all gone! When I googled his name, I didn’t get a single hit!”

She struggled to come up with an answer. “Clifford, think about your condition. Your brain is injured. It isn’t working properly. You —-”

“I’m a cripple!”

“You’re only human. And everybody overlooks things. It’s perfectly normal. You’ll see, tomorrow—-”

“No! I would never overlook Ivanhoe. Never!”

Julie pulled back, using the wheels on her stool to move farther away from him, as if she was afraid he might jump at her.

“Julie, there’s something you’re not telling me. Admit it! Just tell me the truth! What happened to Ivanhoe?”

“Clifford, you overestimate me. I’m only your therapist. I’ll help you as best I can, but I don’t have superpowers. I—-”

“I only want to know what happened to Ivanhoe! Is he still alive? Please tell me!”

Julie’s eyes filled with tears.

“What happened to him? Is he alive? Please, Julie! Just tell me!”

The tears ran down her cheeks.

“He’s seriously injured, isn’t he?” Monterny yelled. “He’s in an even worse state than Scrag and Bosley! Is that what happened?”

She let her head drop and wiped the tears from her eyes. “Clifford...” She looked at the clock so that she would not have to look him in the eye. “I’m sorry, but our time is up for today. I can’t keep the other patients waiting.”

Then Julie fled the room.

She never came again.

She was replaced the next day by another woman: Mrs. Keefer. Mrs. Keefer was older, and she was strict. When Monterny asked what had happened to Ms. Ledge, she gave him a terse answer. Ms. Ledge, she said, had been removed from the case.

She sat there stiffly and did not say another word about it, but Monterny knew why Julie hadn’t come back. He had driven her away with his anger.

The realization made him even angrier. Mrs. Keefer didn’t care. She ignored his rage. The list on the clipboard was like a script to her, a script from which she never departed no matter how much Monterny improvised. She just sat there on the stool and waited silently until his tirades had made him so nauseous that he ran out of steam. And then she started at exactly the same point she had left off.

A few days later, he gave up trying. And to his surprise, he realized that Julie had at least not lied to him about one thing: the path ahead was a long and difficult one. But it was a path. And it led back to the place that most people took for granted.

The feelings of nausea began to come less frequently, and Monterny was given permission to leave his bed. In the beginning, he was accompanied closely by two strong male nurses, and he used a walking aid for support. He felt robbed of his dignity but began to gain some of it back when he managed to use the bathroom on his own again.

His memory returned. The process was gradual and fragmented —-the day on which he was wounded always ended with a picture in his head of Ivanhoe holding the boy in his arms. But he was making progress. And when they asked him what his brother's name was, he had an answer: Paul. It must have been right, because Mrs. Keefer checked one of the boxes on her list.

And one day a man named Paul appeared in his room. He didn't look like the image Monterny had of him in his mind...was nothing like the boy on the swing he remembered. The man was grown up. And successful. He wore an expensive suit and a designer wristwatch. The puppy fat he had barely grown out of was fast on its way to becoming the typically flabby midriff of the well-situated.

"Hey, bro! What's up?" Paul stopped in front of the bed without offering him his hand.

"I'm good. I... I suppose, all things considered."

Paul nodded. "You've been really lucky. If this had happened ten years ago, you wouldn't have survived. I talked to the doctors. They've made enormous progress with brain trauma. Iraq and Afghanistan have..."

Monterny wasn't listening. He had directed his attention inwards. This man was his brother, and he felt nothing. He did not know him, and what was more, he didn't like him. He saw smugness in his features. Pity. Revulsion. Monterny didn't know which of the three was worse.

"Why did you come on your own?" he said, interrupting the brother who wasn't. This unknown person was now telling him about the military reinforcements in Iraq and about the prospects of a change in strategy in light of the asymmetric conflicts the army had to cope with in the 21st century. "What's with our parents?"

"Mom and Dad?" Paul was visibly uncomfortable. "They send their regards. They'll visit you again as soon as they can. And I'm supposed to give you this!" He held out a bouquet of flowers, which he had obviously forgotten in his nervousness.

“Put it with the other one!” Monterny said. He had left the bouquet that his parents had supposedly brought him, which had long since wilted, standing in its vase. “There are vases in the closet.”

Paul got one out and placed the flowers on the nightstand. He bent forward, stretching himself as if his brother was a beast of prey that could attack at any time. There was an embarrassed silence. Paul stood there and tried not to look at Monterny.

Monterny released his brother from the awkwardness. “How are you? Everything okay at work?”

Paul eagerly grasped at the lifeline being thrown to him. Monterny learned that his brother worked on Wall Street. Real estate. Fantastic business. A sure thing. The prices were going in only one direction: up. Paul offered to invest the pension that the army would surely offer, said he knew a few people...

He then checked his watch, saying it was almost four o’clock and he had to get going. A meeting, he said. Which was just as important on Wall Street as the Sunday service at church. There was no way he could miss it.

Monterny made no comment. His stomach was tied up in knots. Another memory had come back to him: Paul, urging him not to be stupid enough to sign up for the army.

Paul’s handshake was limp and moist.

“Stay strong, bro!” he said, and then he was gone.

Monterny felt sick. He pulled over his walking aid, supported himself on its handrail, and made his way to the bathroom. He only just managed to reach the toilet before being violently sick. Afterwards, he pulled himself up by holding on to the wash basin and washed the acidic taste of vomit out of his mouth.

When he looked in the mirror, he could see why his brother had fled the room as if trying to escape from a monster. The left side of his face was intact. Viewed from the left, Clifford Monterny was still

the idealistic boy next door who had gone to war to fight the good cause for his country. The popular boy liked by everyone—-*loved* by everyone.

But the right side was maimed. The explosive device that had nearly killed him had been full of nails and screws. They had dug into his flesh and transformed his features into a gruesome landscape of suffering.

This suffering was to define his very existence.

Three months after his brother's visit, Monterny was released from the clinic. Nobody had visited him in the time in between—-at least nobody whose visit he could remember. His memory remained as unreliable as his body. There were days on which he was strong and able, almost like his old self. But there were others on which he hardly made it out of bed and to the bathroom without help.

And yet they discharged him from the hospital. His time was up, and the army needed the bed. There were too many wounded soldiers coming in from Iraq and Afghanistan. So one surprisingly sunny November morning, Clifford Monterny found himself outside the clinic with a wheeled suitcase full of his belongings. The Walter Reed Army Medical Center was in Washington DC, in the middle of the city.

It seemed to Monterny that the entire population of Washington was strolling along the broad sidewalk in front of the clinic, everyone walking past him, pretending not to stare. But they *were* staring at him. Every single one of them. At him, the monster. He could feel it.

His face burned, even the healthy half. He wanted to cover his scars with his hands and run back into the clinic he had come to hate. Or pull up the manhole cover at his feet and disappear into the sewer system, into the dark and deserted underworld of the city. His only desire was to get away. To somewhere he could be alone, where he wasn't exposed to the gazes of others. Where...

"Clifford?"

He knew that voice. But it couldn't be possible, could it? He turned around.

It was possible. Julie Ledge. She didn't have her uniform on. An attractive young woman in a short skirt and a top free at the shoulders. His heart skipped a beat, and then felt like it would stop beating altogether as he remembered how he had treated her. He had driven her away with his rage.

"J-Julie," he said. He was able to talk again, but he had a stammer whenever he got excited or nervous. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay. That can happen when someone has been through what you have." She indicated with a wave of her hand that it wasn't important. "And anyway, it's my job. It's what I'm paid for."

It was clear that she meant what she said. Monterny's heart calmed a little. He searched for words.

"Y-You're on your way to work?" he asked.

"Yes and no. My shift starts in a few minutes. But to be honest..." She hesitated and closed her eyes for a moment as if trying to remember what it was that had brought her there. "I was waiting for you. I knew you were being discharged today."

"You were waiting? Why?"

"To say goodbye. But more than anything, to give you some encouragement." She stretched out her hand, took hold of his wrist and squeezed it briefly. "You're at a difficult juncture, Clifford. A very hard place. At Walter Reed, we try to do everything in our power to help, but we can't undo the past. A lot of our patients die. A long death. In installments."

She put on her professional friendly face and said hello to some colleagues who passed them. When she turned back to Monterny, she had a worried expression. "Many of the patients are broken. When they look at their wounds, they feel mutilated. They look in the mirror and believe themselves to be worthless."

Monterny said nothing. Her words were so accurate it was as if she had read his mind.

“But they’re mistaken. They *are* worth it. And even more than that: you are extraordinary, Clifford!”

“Me?” Even the thought of that was absurd.

“You haven’t noticed it yet, have you? You have a way with others, Clifford. People have difficulty refusing you.”

“It *used* to be like that. But it’s over now. And you know exactly why. Look at my face.”

Julie shook her head. “No, it’s still like that. Your face is terrible, that’s true. But that’s only the surface. What counts is what’s on the inside. You have an unusual talent.”

“Yeah, sure. Who can scare people the way I can?”

“Yes, you’re good at that too. But that’s only one side of you. The other is that you can win people over. Make them do things it would be better for them not to.”

What was going on here? Monterny didn’t understand. “What are you talking about?”

“For example, the fact that I am standing here right now risking my dream job for which I still have to pay off thirty thousand dollars in student debt. Or that I can’t get your ‘Please!’ out of my head. The fact that it robs me of sleep night after night, that I overstepped the mark and looked at files I’m not authorized to look at. Isn’t that enough already?”

“Julie…but…did you…”

“Do you want to know what I found out?”

“Yes!”

“Your comrade Sanders… He’s missing.”

“What? How can that be?”

“Nobody knows. On the evening after you were wounded, he was still at the Joint Security Station, then the next morning he was gone. He must have run away.”

“Sanders would never do that! He was far too scared to leave the base even when ordered to!”

“All I can tell you is what I found in the army files. Do you want to hear more?”

“Yes, please!”

“The child is alive. Thanks to your courageous intervention. He was taken to a military field hospital.”

“What about Ivanhoe?”

“Corporal Ivanovich Gorachin is alive.”

“He’s alive! Where is he? What’s he doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“But it must be in the files...”

She interrupted him. “Clifford, believe me, your friend is fine. I can’t tell you more than that.” Her eyes glistened moistly. “I wish you all the best in life!”

“Julie! Don’t go, please!”

“No. I have to get away from you, Clifford.” Tears ran down her cheeks, and she was shaking slightly. “You really do have two faces —-on the inside as well. One of them attracts me with a power that’s not from this world. The other... The other one scares me!”

She slipped through the entrance into the hospital. Monterny watched her go until the doors of her elevator closed and she was gone.

6.

July 11, 2036

Clifford Monterny was hovering a hand's breadth above the ground in the space where Crest da Zoltral was imprisoned. The Arkonide sat cross-legged on the bed, which was practically the only piece of furniture in there, reading a book. When he heard the door open, he looked up, and the book slid out of his hands.

"Monterny!" he cried. "You're in battledress! Where—-"

"You should never underestimate us barbarians, Crest."

Monterny glanced at the cover of the book. It was a story about the American Civil War. Why was the Arkonide reading something like that? It was difficult to say. Crest spent nearly his time reading. His concentration seemed to be as inexhaustible as his hunger for books. The alien generally needed only an hour to finish a book. And he wasn't choosy. There was apparently no subject in which Crest did not have an interest...unlike the soldiers stationed at Fort Sunrise. The barracks library was always deserted, and the books the Arkonide requested threw up a small cloud of dust every time he opened one of them.

"I have never underestimated you for a second, Monterny!" Crest said in an unusually loud tone of voice. It was an attempt to cover up his disbelief. "Where did you get the Arkonide battledress?"

"Where do you think?" Monterny allowed himself to float on the spot. It worked silently. Not even the slightest humming could be heard. "My people have, of course, searched the area around Dr. Haggard's clinic in Ethiopia. You and Manoli obviously had some means of transport to get from the Gobi to Bangalore and then from there to Africa. An airplane like we use on Earth was out of the question. It couldn't have escaped our attention. So we must have been talking about an Arkonide machine. And it was clear that you must have hidden it somewhere."

“Ethiopia is a very big country,” Crest argued.

“Not big enough, I’m afraid, to withstand my determination.”

He remained silent and allowed his words to make an impact on the alien. The mutant was deliberately refraining from using his power of suggestion. He did not want the Arkonide to like him. Not yet. First of all, it was important to unleash his anger so that it would be easier for Tatiana Michalovna to read his mind. The telepath was in the room next door, following it all via the surveillance cameras that recorded every second of Crest’s existence from a dozen different angles.

It was Tatiana Michalowna who had used her powers to coax the information about the hiding place of the Arkonide battledresses from Eric Manoli. But the Arkonide could not know that.

“I must express my admiration of your people,” Monterny said. “This uniform is an absolute marvel!”

Crest took a deep breath. “Spare me the hypocritical compliments! If you had even the slightest interest in the Arkonides, you would let me go!”

Monterny shook his head. “It’s unfortunately not up to me. And even if it was, I don’t know whether I would be doing you a favor by setting you free. Where would you go, Crest?”

He didn’t get an answer. The alien pressed his lips together tightly as if he were trying with all his might to prevent an unseemly scream from escaping his throat.

Crest da Zoltral was the last Arkonide in the solar system. The huge ship that he and his crewmates had brought to the Moon had been destroyed. There were no survivors. He was all alone. His ship had not sent out an emergency signal, so there would be no mission to rescue him. The only friend he had left was Perry Rhodan, but what kind of friend was he? Rhodan was under siege by the Chinese army, and he was only holding out thanks to some artifacts of Arkonide technology. Not one single government on Earth had lifted a finger to help him. The only support, if you could even call

it that, was dubious: a few thousand crazy people who had followed his unrealistic appeal to establish the city of Terrania and had somehow managed to find their way through the Gobi.

Rhodan's days were numbered. Crest knew that just as surely as Monterny did.

The mutant stroked the sleeve of the battledress with his hand. His fingers felt the surface of the material as if it didn't already line his gloves. It was soft, and at the same time Monterny believed he could feel how durable it was.

"It feels like a second skin," he noted. "You soon forget it's a technical device that weighs more than fifty kilograms. And more than that..." He turned back to face Crest "You almost get the feeling it can read your thoughts. But that's madness, of course." He laughed. "Telepathy is utter nonsense, is it not?"

Crest did not say a word. But that was irrelevant. Tatiana controlled his thoughts and later on she would be able to answer the question of whether the Arkonides were familiar with psychic powers.

"And yet, if you take some time to think about it, you soon realize there must be something in it," Monterny continued. "A computer far superior in terms of efficiency and miniaturization to anything that humankind has ever come up with." He stroked his fingers across the breastplate of the battledress. "Integrated. Somewhere here. Perhaps distributed de-centrally but also capable of analyzing and reading the wearer's body language in the shortest time. In the beginning, the wearer has to give instructions verbally. But after only a few hours, it can literally read the wishes of the wearer from his or her body."

"Why are you boring me with everyday matters like that, Monterny?" The tears of agitation on the Arkonide's eyes turned into tears of anger. "Why don't you just come right out and say what it is that you want from me?"

"It is regrettable that you don't have the chance to come outside, Crest," Monterny said, ignoring the Arkonide's words.

Crest came from a fantastically superior civilization, but at this moment it was he, Monterny, the human, who had control over how the conversation would go.

“We are in the Adirondack Mountains, not far from the Canadian border. Nobody lives here. You might almost think you were on an untouched planet. An endless landscape of forests, mountains, rivers and lakes. A wonderful place to test this product of Arkonide technology undisturbed.”

Monterny nodded appreciatively. “The results are breathtaking. Top speeds of just below Mach one. An agility that is not of this world, and at the same time perfect protection. The battledress’s shield is impenetrable against all weapons that humans have at their disposal. Add to that oxygen, food, and water for several days. This is a small, unassailable microcosm. Do you realize the owner of a battledress like this is the most powerful person on Earth?”

“You are showing your hand, Monterny. Power... That is all you are interested in, is it not?”

“No. You should listen more closely. It’s not power I want, but possibilities. This battledress is a tool that presents a great number of possibilities to the person wearing it. Don’t you understand that this is nothing short of a miracle for me, a barbarian from Earth?”

Crest made a disdainful gesture with his hand. “For me, it is perfectly normal, not even worth further mention. And you are too intelligent not to know that. So what do you want from me?”

Monterny remained silent for several seconds, acting as if the Arkonide’s astuteness had surprised him, as if he had not planned for their encounter to take this path from the very beginning.

“Well, this Arkonide battledress is a miracle. But it is a transient miracle. One day, perhaps very soon, its energy source will run out. A maintenance interval will expire. Defects will occur, first smaller ones, until ultimately total breakdown occurs. It makes me sad just thinking about it. You are, of course, aware, Crest, that we only have two of these.” He stared intently at the Arkonide. “Unless you tell us how they are made!”

“No!” Crest answered without a moment’s hesitation.

“Why not?”

“I said no!”

“And I say that your answer is a little premature.” Monterny leaned forward. The battledress interpreted his movement correctly and slid closer to the alien. “Think about it, Crest! Think about the circumstances you find yourself in. You are all alone on Earth. Alone among barbarians without the slightest hope of being rescued. Do you know what that means?”

Crest said nothing and demonstratively turned his head to the side.

“I’m telling you, your fate lies entirely in your own hands. If you snub the barbarians, you will only bring out the worst in them. Their anger, their aggression, their fear. And before you know it, you’ll find yourself on a funeral pyre.”

He picked up the book that Crest had been reading and flipped through it.

“The American Civil War is only one example among many of the boundless ability of humans to hurt one another. Why should things be any different in your case?” He set the book aside again. “But it doesn’t have to end that way. There is another role you could play for humanity. You could be our mentor, perhaps even our God. Respected, held in high esteem. Just think about that, Crest!”

“That won’t be necessary. My answer is still no.”

Monterny squeezed his eyes shut. “You disappoint me. I thought you were cleverer than that. It would be such a small thing for you.”

“It would be anything but!” Crest cut in. “Believe me, even if I wanted to, I couldn’t tell you how the battledress was made!”

“Why not?” Monterny’s surprise was not an act this time. It was

the first turn in the conversation that he had not foreseen. “It is a product of your technology!”

“And?” Crest lifted his arm and pointed at the old-fashioned radio alarm clock that was built into the wall. It wasn’t working. “That device is a product of your technology, is it not?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Can you show me, or at least explain to me, how to make such a device?”

Monterny stared at the simple radio alarm clock and realized where his thinking had gone wrong. In highly developed civilizations, there was a division of labor. Radio alarm clocks were produced in a few factories. The chances that he worked in one of those factories was very slim. Just as slim as the chances that he had studied the concepts, construction, and manufacture of radio alarm clocks.

The same applied to Crest and the Arkonide battledress. The old alien really didn’t know how they were produced. But he must have known other things.

“Then explain to me the physical principles that the battledress is based on!”

“I can’t do that any better.”

“But you’re a scientist.”

“That’s right. And a highly respected one, I would like to add.”

Monterny ignored the allusions in that comment. “So how can you claim to be so ignorant of everything?”

“Because of the area of knowledge I am involved in. I am a Derengar. In your language that translates approximately as a combination of anthropologist and historian. I study the nature of the Arkonides and their society, not trivial mechanics!”

Crest was telling the truth. Monterny could feel it, and he had no

doubt that Tatiana would confirm it later. But he could not leave Crest alone. This was the only Arkonide in the solar system who was still alive. And what was more, Crest da Zoltral was on a quest to find the secret of eternal life. Which justified every lie, every act.

The Arkonide looked at him, his eyes wide open and moist with tears. Crest was so angry that he was shaking. There was no way he was backing down in the ensuing battle of words.

Monterny said nothing. His right hand moved towards the pocket that was worked into the upper thigh area of the battledress. He opened it and pulled out the weapon. Crest winced as if he had been punched. He hissed something in his native tongue that Monterny understood to be a hurried prayer. Then he composed himself and said in English, “Where did you get the ray gun? I instructed Manoli to store it separately from the battledresses!”

“Which he did. But as you can see, his choice of hiding place was not good enough.”

“You threatened him!”

“No. We might be barbarians, but we are not stupid barbarians. A little logical thinking was sufficient. Nobody would venture among savages without a weapon. Meaning that no Arkonide would venture among humans unarmed. But the Arkonide is intelligent, so he would naturally make sure that the savages did not get a hold of the weapon...” Monterny lifted up the ray gun. “It wasn’t that hard to find. Manoli had buried it close to the clinic.”

The mutant lifted his free hand, then brought both hands together to form a surface on which this weapon the Arkonides referred to as a ray gun lay, as if on a platform.

It was simple. The dull material—-it was as light as plastic but felt as strong as steel—-was smooth and, like the battledress, seemed to have a camouflage function. If you put it down, it was easy to overlook. The grip was roughened to offer a better grip. There was no trigger. There was a kind of metal tongue on one side that activated the weapon when you squeezed it between your thumb and index finger. At least that’s how Monterny supposed it

worked.

“I ask myself,” the mutant said, “what will happen if I fire this ray gun?” He took the weapon into his right hand. As if by accident, he pointed the muzzle at Crest. “It’s impact must be devastating. Far beyond anything human weapons could achieve.”

“You’re making a mistake by thinking that my species is as brutal as yours,” Crest said.

“I’m not speaking of brutality.” Monterny left the barrel of the ray gun pointed at the Arkonide. “And you can believe me, I am familiar with brutality. I served in a war. I have done some terrible things, and I have personally experienced brutality of a physical nature. It was brutality that made me what I am...” He stroked the disfigured side of his skull.

“That’s...what caused it?” Crest searched for words. He must have come from a world that no longer knew scars. Not physical ones at least. “I’m sorry for you, Monterny.”

It sounded honest. It was the moment he had been waiting for. Crest had opened up to him, if only a little.

The mutant activated his special power.

“Humans are brutal.” Monterny lowered the muzzle of the ray gun. “And resourceful. Our weapons are exquisitely sophisticated and brutal, and what they are capable of is always one step ahead of our good intentions, with the result being that we humans are always just a hair’s breadth away from killing each another. Collectively, we were on the way to doing just that when your ship landed on the Moon. We have enough atomic warheads to destroy the Earth many times over, not to mention biological and chemical weapons.”

The suggestion worked. He could see it in Crest’s body language. All the tension had gone from him. The tears he wept were no longer tears of anger, but tears of sympathy.

“I don’t know a lot about the Arkonides,” Monterny continued.

“Unfortunately. I would like to find out more, to learn from you. From the little that I know, I conclude that your people are more advanced than ours. And why? It’s quite simple. They have *not* killed one another. Despite the fact that they have far more ways of doing so. Both small ways...” He lifted the ray gun, taking care not to aim it at Crest this time. “And large ones.”

He lowered the ray gun once again.

“Crest, you say you are neither a technician nor a scientist. I believe you. And even if I regret that you cannot teach us about your technology, I am convinced that you can teach us humans something far more important. If you were only willing to let go of those preconceived notions of yours...” The mutant put the ray gun away. “Crest da Zoltral, *please* help us!”

Clifford Monterny floated away without waiting for an answer. He could sense that he had broken Crest’s resistance. All he had to do now was wait a bit. The next time he came, the Arkonide would have a more positive attitude towards him.

The Arkonide Crest da Zoltral, who was on a quest to find eternal life.

7.

The Past

"That one there! With the double garage!"

Clifford Monterny pulled in to the right and turned the engine off. The houses all looked alike to him—-off-the-rail villas eating up Florida's land.

But Monterny said nothing. Lewis always knew exactly what the lay of the land was...and what he wanted. They needed money. Just this one break-in and then they would settle down somewhere. Lewis knew where he wanted to go—-to the Mesa. He had seen a film about it on the Internet.

"A place for guys like you and me" is how he had described it. He had clipped the Google-Maps printout to the dashboard, as if presenting proof that the Mesa really did exist.

Monterny found Lewis's self-confidence unsettling. And yet at the same time, it had a magnetic quality for him. He was lacking the very emotion that made Monterny's life a nightmare: doubt.

Lewis was also a brother in arms, serving in Afghanistan once, in Iraq twice. The two men shared the silent understanding of veterans; something that only people who had experienced war could understand.

Lewis didn't care about Monterny's disfigured face. He had seen worse.

"Wait here!" Lewis said. "I'll take a look."

The muscular black man stepped out of the car. Once on the sidewalk, he turned around and stuck his head through the open window on the passenger side. "And don't wet yourself, Monterny, okay? It's a walk in the park, you'll see."Then he disappeared into the night.

Monterny remained in his seat. He didn't want to be there, and he didn't want to do what they were about to do, but what choice did he have? He had nowhere else to go. He had no money. And the pension he was due still hadn't come through. He had to eat, didn't he?

He pulled his wallet out of his pocket, took out the photo, and held it up to the light of the street lamp.

Julie.

It was a grainy color print, copied from a photograph he had found of her on the clinic website. It was only slightly bigger than a postage stamp, but at least it was a photo. Something he could hold on to. He had printed it out at an Internet café on the day he was released from the hospital.

Monterny knew that he would never see her again. And he knew that, without her, he didn't have a chance in hell of overcoming his disfigurement.

"Are you dreaming about your girlfriend again?"

Lewis was back. Monterny hastily put the photo away.

"She's not my girlfriend!"

"You should know." The other man shrugged. "Come on, the house is good. The people who live there were too stingy to buy an alarm system."

They climbed over the fence and snuck across the lawn. It was a hot night and Monterny's T-shirt clung to his body.

Lewis opened the veranda door using a checking card, and had no more difficulty getting in than he would have had using the actual key. It was not his first break-in.

"Let's split up. I'll take upstairs, you stay down here, okay?"

"Okay."

Lewis darted up the steps while Monterny remained standing there, unsure of what to do next. He felt like an intruder, which of course he was. He had no right to be there, no right to steal from these people.

He started moving around, exploring the house in the pale moonlight coming through the window. What did one actually steal during a break-in? And where did people hide their valuables?

He passed by a dresser. It had a photo of a young man on it, about his age, wearing a black mortarboard and holding a rolled-up deed in his hand. He was smiling, his face undamaged.

Monterny smashed the photo against the wall, breaking the frame into pieces. He had fought for these people, for their prosperity. And now? He went hungry and had to suffer the revulsion he recognized in their expressions when they saw his disfigured face. It wasn't fair.

Furious now, he ran through the house tearing paintings from the wall, trampling on them, and slitting open upholstery...

...until Lewis was suddenly back.

"Come on, comrade. We have enough." He lifted up a plastic bag, which was full to bursting. "Let's get out of here!"

They rushed over the lawn to the fence, climbed over it, and jumped down onto a pathway, suddenly finding themselves blinded by a glaring light.

"Stay where you are," a calm voice commanded. "Raise your hands, slowly!"

The bright circle of light lowered a little. Monterny could see a police officer. He was holding a torch in one hand and a pistol in the other.

Monterny looked at Lewis. His companion dropped the bag and raised his hands. It was neither his first break-in nor his first arrest. Monterny followed his example.

The policeman tilted his head to one side and spoke into the radio that was clipped to his chest. He was requesting backup from the other officers on his patrol. They would be driven to the station where he and Lewis would stand before a judge and end up in jail.

It was over.

Monterny couldn't help thinking of Julie. How disappointed she would be with him. Him, extraordinary? A common criminal was what he was, nothing more.

Or was he? Her voice came to him again: *"You can win people over. Make them do things it would be better for them not to."*

Julie had risked her job for him because she couldn't get his pleas out of her head. What if he...

Monterny did not want to go to jail. He looked at the policeman and made eye contact with him. "Officer, I'm begging you, help me!" Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he spoke. He grew hot.

The policeman winced as if he had received an electric shock.

"*Please,* help me!" Monterny repeated.

Was he mistaken, or could he see a moist gleam in the man's eyes?

"I didn't want to do it," Monterny insisted. "I'm not a criminal. I'll never do it again. There's no reason to lock me up."

The barrel of the officer's gun was shaking.

Lewis hissed, "Monterny, what the hell are you doing? What's going on?"

Monterny ignored him. "Lewis made me do it, Officer. *He's* a bad person."

Lewis made to attack Monterny, but he let it go when the policeman pointed his weapon. "Stay where you are, Lewis!"

“I’m not bad,” Monterny continued. “*Please,* Officer, let me go!”

The policeman tilted his head to the side. “Walt,” he said into his radio, “you can finish your burger. I made a mistake. It’s only one burglar. Unarmed. I have the situation under control.”

“Thank you, Officer.”

Monterny started moving, passing by the policeman in the certainty that the latter would do nothing to him. Lewis, who always knew the lay of the land, followed him silently in a daze. What was happening *could not* be true.

Monterny got into the car and slumped behind the wheel. Sweat was pouring from his forehead. His limbs felt heavy, and his muscles hurt the way they used to when he was doing basic training in the army. Julie had been right. He *was* extraordinary. People did things for him that they would never have done of their own free will. He only had to ask, only had to really want it.

But what now? He noticed the printout stuck to the dashboard. The Mesa. “A place for guys like you and me,” Lewis had said.

Why not?

Clifford Monterny started the engine and embarked on a new life.

“Cliff, wake up!”

Monterny was woken up abruptly by someone banging loudly on his door. He looked at the clock: almost four a.m.

The hammering moved along the wall until the person outside was banging on the window. “Cliff, come. Quick!”

“Stop it!” he called out. “I’m coming!”

Monterny would have loved nothing more than to turn on his side again and go back to sleep. There was only one person who didn’t understand that, no matter how often he reminded her:

Nancy. Her memory was like a sieve. But it wasn't an explosive device that had blown holes in her mind. Too much dope, too many bad trips.

She hammered even harder. If he didn't get up, she would break a pane of glass. And it was cold in the Mesa in winter.

He opened the door for her, and she stormed into the room.

"Those kids are back again, Cliff! You have to do something."

The "kids" were a group of youths who had run away from home —-if they had ever had one. In Mesa, they had soon made themselves very unpopular with break-ins. The community had banned them, and Monterny actually thought they were too intelligent to dare come back again.

He slipped into his pants, which were damp. "How do you know that? Was there another break-in?"

Nancy shook her head. "They're setting stuff on fire!"

She ran out of the hut. He put on his jacket and followed her. A thin layer of snow covered the flat landscape which, when he had first arrived there years ago, he unknowingly referred to as "desert".

Nancy pointed south in the direction of the Mexican border. The night was lit up by large flames.

"They're setting fire to trailers, Cliff! Do something!"

He didn't have much of a choice. If there was anything like a leader in the Mesa, he was it. The place was a barren no-man's land that nobody wanted. At some point in the past, people had started parking their trailers there or built improvised huts like his. They were stranded, people nobody else wanted. They had created their own little world there, with no authorities and no police. The only laws that mattered were the ones they had made up and the ones that asserted themselves.

"Okay, let's go have a look," Monterny said.

He wanted to go to his rusty pick-up, but Nancy stopped him.

“Without?” she asked, holding up her rifle.

“Of course not.”

Monterny went into the house to get his rifle. It was an M-16, like the one he’d carried when he was a soldier in Iraq. He would have preferred not to have a gun at all, but that was impossible in the Mesa. And he had to admit that Nancy was right. If it really was the kids who had started the fires, it was time to communicate with them using something other than words.

“What about the rest?” he asked as they got into the pick-up.

Nancy spat out the car window, which didn’t have any glass. “You know what they’re like!”

Yes, he knew them. And he often despised the inhabitants of the Mesa for their pettiness and countless weaknesses. But they had taken him in. Initially out of fear, but over the years they had come to respect him. There were often disputes in the Mesa, and he had proved to have an almost uncanny talent for separating people in a brawl.

The pick-up clattered over the dust road, and Monterny was driving with the headlamps off. Pale light came from the half moon, but he could have found his way with his eyes closed. It was the only road there was.

They left the pick-up parked a few hundred meters from the fires and went the rest of the way on foot. Finally, they got close enough to make out details. A handful of trailers were ablaze. It was no great loss, as the trailers had been abandoned and looted for anything worth having a long time ago. This was obviously a symbolic act by the kids to protest against their banishment. They couldn’t be allowed to get away with it.

“Where are they?” Nancy whispered.

The hooligans were nowhere to be seen. Only a single man was there, standing alone in the light given off by the flames. The

flickering illumination allowed for no more than a rough outline to become visible, yet something stirred in Monterny.

“That’s not a kid.”

“Then it’s some kind of crazy guy. I’ll show him!” Nancy aimed her rifle at the man.

“No!” Monterny yelled, pushing the barrel to the side. “Let me talk to him.”

“Why? He’s on our land. He’s playing with fire. We need to show him what that means!”

“I said I want to talk to him!”

“Why? You’re only taking risks, and he might be dangerous! Who knows how many pals he has hiding somewhere in the dark?”

“I want to talk to him, understand?”

He stood up and went towards the flames, leaving his rifle lying on the ground. Nancy hissed something at him, but he just ignored her.

When he reached the area illuminated by the fire, the man turned to him and said, “Clifford, there you are at last!”

“Ivanhoe?”

Monterny froze. It must have been a trick. An illusion created by his battered brain.

“Wh... What are you doing here?”

“What do you think? I’m looking for you, old friend.” Ivanovich Goratchin, his long lost friend, smiled at him.

“Why are you burning down the trailers?”

It was the only question that occurred to Monterny. He had often thought about Ivanhoe, but the memories of his comrade had faded

with the passing of time as he became accustomed to his life in the Mesa, and his new life eventually became the only reality he could imagine.

“You don’t like the fires?” Ivanhoe asked. “I’m sorry I had to resort to such measures. I asked after you, but nobody wanted to give me any information.”

Of course not. Ivanhoe was a stranger. Clean-shaven and wearing a suit. He didn’t belong in the Mesa. The community was just trying to protect Monterny.

“I looked for you, Ivanhoe. Where have you been all these years?”

“It’s a long story. A story for another evening. But as you can see, things could have been worse.”

He spread out his arms, inviting Monterny to take a good look at him. He could have been a banker. He had that arrogant the-world-belongs-to-me attitude typical of such professions. But Ivanhoe was too muscular and fit for a banker. He didn’t have the usual paunch that not even the best personal trainer could prevent. And there was that seriousness that had always set him apart from the rest. He had always wanted to understand, and he never tired of seeking answers.

“What’s with your leg?” Monterny asked.

“As good as new.”

“The... The second explosive device. Did it get you?” Monterny had to force the question out between his teeth. The improvised bomb had made a cripple of him.

“It was nothing. On the outside. But I’ve never been the same since that day. Just like you, Clifford.”

“What do you mean?”

“You feel it too.”

“What?”

“You’re not a normal person anymore.”

“No!”

Monterny took a step back. He was suddenly very afraid. He had thought longingly of this encounter so many times. To hug his old comrade. As if, by doing so, he could turn back the clock to the time before he was a cripple. But there was no going back. This man before him was Ivanhoe, but not the Ivanhoe he had been in Iraq with.

“I’ll show it to you,” the Russian said. “Do you remember ‘Hearts and Minds Alley’ in Sadr City? That boy lying on the road. When we tried to get him into the Humvee, they started shooting at us. Out of a house. Do you remember what happened to the house?”

“It was destroyed. By a rocket fired from an Apache.”

“You’re close, but still wrong.” Ivanhoe shook his head. “It wasn’t a battle helicopter, but a much more dangerous weapon. His old comrade pointed to one of the trailers. “Watch this!”

Ivanhoe closed his eyes, and a second later, the trailer went up in flames. It had literally turned into a single tongue of flame as soon as Ivanhoe had set his eyes on it. The wave of heat was so strong that Monterny had to take a step back.

“What the… How did you do that?” As a veteran, Monterny was familiar with the handwork of destruction. But he knew of no weapon that did anything like that. And anyway, Ivanhoe wasn’t holding a weapon.

“With the power I have discovered within myself,” Ivanhoe answered. He walked towards Monterny, stopped just in front of him and said in a quiet voice, “That power is in you too, Clifford. And in many others. Come with me, and together we can create a new world!”

8.

July 10, 2036

"There's the dome!"

Sid jumped and nearly fell from the truck bed, which was bucking wildly, only saving himself at the very last moment by hanging on to the grille behind the driver's cabin.

The truck rumbled along the track at breakneck speed, revealing to John Marshall how skilled the driver was. Three weeks ago, there had been nothing here but abandoned desertland. Now there was a marching route with supply chains for the army, whose troops must have numbered in the six-digit range.

"The energy shield!" Sid called out. "Can you see it?"

The question was superfluous, as the dome made of energy stretched half a kilometer into the afternoon sky above the Gobi. It shone golden and was so bright that Marshall had to squeeze his eyes together despite wearing sunglasses.

The other mutants gathered around Sid, vying for the best place to observe the wonder of it. Sue, who was too small and weak to have a chance in any contest with the others, used a trick to help herself. With a jump, she landed on Wuriu Sengu's back. The stocky Japanese man started in surprise, then he straightened and helped the girl to climb up on his shoulders, holding her tight by the shins.

John Marshall was the last to stand. He had difficulty maintaining his balance; the truck bed was not steady underfoot. But there was something else bothering him as well.

"Can you see Terrania?" Sid asked.

The mutants shook their heads. The glare was too strong. The dome was keeping its secrets to itself—-at least for the moment.

Marshall placed himself in the second row, held onto a strut for

steadiness, and looked at the land before them. In front of the dome, about a kilometer away, he could see a dark ring that looked exactly like a circle drawn in the sand. It was the Chinese besiegers. Tightly disciplined and well-organized.

Then, about another kilometer away, a second ring could be seen. Its inside was just as exact as the ring of soldiers within. The Chinese troops were making sure that no one entered the restricted zone. Its outer edge did not exist. The dark mass made up of tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people, frayed out at the edges and became lost in irregular spikes that transitioned into the desert at individual points.

The sea of people was surrounded by the posts of the Chinese army, gathered densely at the foot of a hill. A single large tent had been built there, and a huge red flag fluttered on a flagpole in the wind. It was the command post of General Bai Jun, who was leading the siege.

The traffic grew denser as they approached the outer ring. The driver sped up a little. Sid and the other mutants outdid one another with their speculations. What would Terrania look like? Arkonide robots were working day and night on the city that was destined to become the capital of a united humanity. That much was certain. What might they have already achieved? Were they working on a space port yet? On new ships that would soon carry human beings to distant stars?

Marshall sat down again. He felt a little queasy, and he also felt something that he would not have thought possible: a desire to be back on Owey Island with its cool and refreshing winds and the dampness that got into your very bones. The Gobi was too hot and dry for his tastes. The sand got into his eyes, mouth, and nose. Its gray and brown tones hurt his eyes.

But something disturbed him more than anything else: the people. He was aware of their stench. Their sweat, their excrement, and the rotting trash they left behind. He heard the voices of thousands, to some extent, with his ears, but above all, with his psi senses; in his thoughts.

The telepath John Marshall could not defend himself against this onslaught. He was unable to pick out any individual chains of thought. Instead, there was a constant background noise, like the sound of a distant waterfall or a swarm of insects getting ever closer. Their buzzing sounded threatening.

John had felt uncomfortable in large crowds for as long as he could remember. For a long time, he had not wanted to explore the reasons for this. He now knew more; it was his telepathic powers, and they had become a burden to him. The people flowing into the Gobi were excited, filled with a tension that could blow open at any time...

The truck suddenly came to a halt. They had reached the first in the external ring of people. The driver lowered the window, smacked his hand against the door, and held out his hand, his open palm facing upwards.

Marshall stood up and walked unsteadily to the front end of the loading platform. The mutants made way for him. He bent down towards the driver's cabin and placed a bundle of notes in the man's hand—-the second half of the agreed-upon payment.

The ease with which they had reached the Gobi was almost spooky. In the two and a half weeks since the *Stardust* had landed, a global smuggling ring had established itself and it managed to transport people anywhere they wanted to go. Assuming, of course, you had the exorbitant finances they were demanding to make it happen.

Homer G. Adams did indeed have such finances at his disposal, and he spent his money like there was no tomorrow. The driver counted the cash and knocked on the door a second time. He was happy with the amount, and now he was asking them to clear the space.

They put on their heavy backpacks and jumped from the truck bed. Marshall landed on a loose stone and would have fallen over if Sid had not reacted fast and grabbed him by the arm.

"Everything okay?" he whispered.

“Yeah, sure!” Marshall lied. “I’m just a little tired. Jetlag. I’m not as young as you anymore.”

The look on Sid’s face clearly showed that he didn’t believe him. But the boy left it at that. Marshall had slipped back into his role as their leader. He was the oldest in the group and the most level-headed among them. Sid was the one who motivated them with his enthusiastic manner, but when it came down to it, they trusted in Marshall’s experience.

They had barely jumped down from the truck bed when a dozen dust-covered people were already fighting for a place on the ride back. They were followers of Rhodan who had fulfilled their dreams and now seemed to want only one thing: to get out of the Gobi as fast as possible. But why?

The truck turned and drove away, leaving the mutants in a cloud of dust and sand. Once it had settled down again, Sue asked, “What now?”

Marshall didn’t have an answer to that. And before he could think of one, a voice called out to him in English, “Hey, newcomers! What do you want here? Haven’t you heard? The party’s over!”

A man was standing a short distance away from them. He was dusty and gray like the desert floor, of Asian descent, and he was grinning at them with pity in his eyes.

Sid hated being pitied. “We’re not here for a party,” he replied in an annoyed tone. “Go to hell!”

The man didn’t move. How old might he be? Somewhere between thirty and sixty, Marshall guessed. Small and wiry, and looking just like Marshall imagined the riders under Genghis Khan would have.

“If you want me to, then okay,” the man said. “But that wouldn’t be a very clever idea. I’m not the bad news, only the messenger.”

The air around Sid started to crackle. If there was anything that made him even more furious than pity, it was somebody who

openly questioned his intelligence. Sid was seconds away from attacking the stranger.

Marshall intervened, placing himself between the two. “What’s your name?”he asked. “And what do you want from us?”

“Timucin’s my name. And I want to help you.”

“We don’t need any help!” Sid retorted. “Leave us alone!”

John ignored him. “What’s that supposed to mean? ‘The party’s over’? The energy shield is holding up.” He nodded in the direction of the gleaming dome stretching skyward before them like a mountain.

Timucin shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe so, but the Arkonide thing is from another world. If you ask me, it could hold until the end of time. The problem is, we can’t hold on any longer.”

Sue came over and stood next to Marshall, her healthy hand in her pocket. John could sense that she was shaking. She didn’t trust the stranger.

“And I’ll tell you why.” Timucin used the palms of his hands to brush the dust from his clothes. “That’s why. People are not made to survive in a moonscape like this. We need to eat, we need water. We can’t survive without water, and the Chinese have stopped all supplies.”

“Why?”

He shook his head reproachfully. “That’s the wrong question. The actual question is, why did they ever give us something to eat and drink in the first place? They don’t want us here, but the general up there...”, he pointed towards the hill, on top of which a huge Chinese flag was fluttering in the wind, “Bai Jun had supplies sent to us. Against the will of his superiors. He had everything we needed given to us. Until yesterday. And now it’s to each their own...unless they are lucky enough to have Timucin to help them.” He grinned, revealing stained yellow teeth.

Sid came and stood demonstratively at John’s side. “We’re fine

by ourselves!”

John asked, “How do you want to help us, Timucin?”

“I know a good place where you can set up camp. Freshly vacated, but not for long. There are still enough people who want to stay. I can take you there for a small consideration.”

“What were you thinking of?”

“Water. I see you brought enough with you.” His eyes moved towards the mutants’ heavy backpacks.

Marshall tried to read the mind of the man opposite him. Nothing. He sensed Timucin’s greed, but the man’s thoughts escaped the telepath. It was maddening. What was the use of having a gift you couldn’t rely on?

“So?” Timucin asked.

Marshall looked across the desert. From close up, the ring of Rhodan followers looked like one of the slums that had emerged along the Texas coastline after the hurricane of ’28. Anyone with the slightest bit of common sense avoided them like the plague.

“Okay, then,” he agreed. “Lead us to it!”

“My pleasure!”

Timucin went ahead, guiding them away from the people and out into the desert. Once they got about a hundred meters from the ring, he kept his distance. Marshall realized the ring was no longer circular and had loosened up into bundles that were reminiscent of small forts. The desert in between was covered in trash.

“You were expecting something else, weren’t you?”

Timucin had dropped back a little to come up alongside Marshall, who nodded in reply.

“It was different. In the beginning, everyone stood together. We were like brothers and sisters. Terranians, as Rhodan said. We

shared everything with one another." Was Marshall mistaken, or could he see an idealistic gleam in the eyes of their self-appointed guide?

"Is that no longer so?"

"Now it's everyone for themselves. The sun has burned away our brains and our hopes. And then the Chinese shot down the *Stardust*. We wept in anger and desperation, and then the first dispute happened. And since the fine general cut off our supplies, it's all been coming to an end. Anyone with any brains is getting out of here."

"Really? Why are you still here, then?"

Timucin winced. There was suddenly a glint of anger in his eyes. "You think you're a total wiseguy, don't you?" His pace quickened, and Marshall was left lagging behind.

Sid came and joined Marshall. "I don't like that guy," he whispered.

"Me neither."

"What's he thinking?"

"I don't know. I can't read him."

Sid swallowed and said nothing for a moment. The boy had a power that never failed him. He couldn't understand why John's powers were so patchy. "Let's get started!" he finally whispered. "We have our plan, and this moment is as good as any other!"

Marshall's gaze followed Timucin, who walked across the boulders as if he had done nothing else his entire life. He was not what Marshall had imagined a follower of Rhodan to be. And this was not how he had wanted to spend his first evening in the Gobi. But...

"No", he whispered. "We have to get to know the situation. What's more, we're exhausted, and the time difference is affecting us. I can't even read the guy's mind, and I would give a small

fortune to be able to do that."

To Marshall's surprise, Sid did not protest. The boy fell back a little and continued marching silently.

After a quarter of an hour, they reached a hollow in the desert floor. The sharp edges revealed that it had been dug using spades and pickaxes.

"Here," Timucin said. "Tour new home. You'll be protected from the wind, and it's just the right size to span an awning across. That'll give you shade during the day and keep you warm at night."

They set down their backpacks and started putting the awning they had brought with them in place. Marshall opened his backpack, which was half-full with water bags—-almost twenty liters. He took out a three-liter bag. They had paid a small fortune for it in Hohhot. Out here, it would be worth a lot more. A 'consideration' that should satisfy their guide.

Timucin took the water bag but made no move to leave.

"What's up?" Marshall asked. "Is that not enough consideration for your services?"

"Yes, of course. You are generous."

"So what's your problem?"

"I..." The guide seemed a little sheepish for the first time. "Can I stay with you?"

"Why?" He was surprised by the request. "We're only newcomers. What does a smart guy like you want with us?"

This time, Timucin did not react to the barb. "You are new, that's true. But you're also *different*. Your equipment is good."

"Money can buy a lot of things."

"Also true. But you can't make it out here without equipment.

It's not just the equipment... You are also somehow different. You might just have a chance of reaching Rhodan..."

"You seem to think we're capable of a lot."

"Not more than you yourselves think you're capable of. Or did you come here just to have a good look at the energy shield and then go again?"

Marshall felt exactly the same way Sid did. There was something about this Timucin that didn't add up. However, was that not a good reason to keep him close? And with any luck, Marshall might be able to read what was going on in the guide's mind the next day. If he achieved that, Timucin would not be a risk to them. And they could profit from his experience.

"Fine, you can stay. For now, at least."

"Thank you! You won't regret it." Timucin turned around and helped the mutants put up the awning. "No, no!" he called. "That's not how it goes. You have to make it tighter, otherwise the first storm will blow it away."

Later on, after the sun had gone down, John Marshall hunkered down in front of the hollow in the ground and kept watch. He listened to the desert and tried to listen to his gift, which he hoped would protect them from any unpleasant surprises, and he looked alternately at the stars in the night sky and the dome of the energy shield.

He asked himself what he was actually doing there. Only a few weeks ago, his entire world had revolved around the Pain Shelter and the thirty children for whom he had been like a father. He had believed it to be the real world. The only world that mattered. He had considered space travel, aliens, world politics to be sheer madness. Escapism for people who either didn't understand what was really important in life or who didn't have the courage to face up to it.

And now he was sitting in the desert looking at a miracle rising

up before him, wonderful and flawless, even magical. Under the protection of that shield was a man whose failure would mean the failure of the entire human race.

He, John Marshall, and his companions were the only hope that Rhodan had.

It was absurd. It felt right, as if he had finally found his path in life. And it was only the beginning.

In the hollow, someone was pulling open the zipper of their sleeping bag. Suddenly, a shadow rushed towards him, hopped into his lap and snuggled in.

Sue. Marshall enjoyed her warmth, the boundless trust the girl had in him, and he tried to imagine what surprises fate still had in store for him.

But he saw nothing.

Water!

The thought shook Marshall abruptly from his slumber. His throat was dried out, as if he hadn't had a drop to drink for days.

He sat up straight. Sue had rolled herself up in his sleeping bag and was snoring away quietly. John reached out to get the bottle he wore on his belt. It was empty. He had already drunk. So why was he so thirsty?

He heard a noise—-stone on stone. He turned towards it and realized that the thirst torturing him was not his own. A figure was bending over the place where they had set down their backpacks.

"Hey!" Marshall roared. "Get away from there!"

The thief paid him no attention. Marshall jumped up and pulled the thief back. It was a woman.

"That's our water!" he yelled.

She tried to punch him, and her nails dug deep into his cheek. The pain triggered a feeling of rage in him that he had never felt before. He grabbed her and pushed her away. She cowered on the floor, in a pose not unlike a wild cat that was about to attack. Then, as the rest of John's companions began climbing out of their sleeping bags, she ran out into the desert night.

"What happened?" Anne asked.

"A thief," Marshallsaid. He pressed a tissue against the wound on his cheek. "She wanted our water, but she's gone now."

"She's not the only one," Sid noted. "Timucin has also disappeared. Along with my backpack."

"What? That can't be!"

"But it is."

All that was left of Sid's backpack was the impression it had left in the sand. And a considerable portion of their water reserves were gone with it. The boy had carried extra weight for Sue, who was too weak to carry anything but the most necessary articles.

Anne, who did not believe in hiding her feelings, cursed loudly. Marshall tried to calm her down.

"It's not as bad as it seems. We brought plenty with us. We have enough water for two days, and by then..."

He was cut short by the rattling sound of a machine gun. The mutants threw themselves to the ground—-a reflex that had become second nature thanks to their training on Owey Island. The bullets sprayed overhead and buried themselves in the earthen mound that surrounded the hollow.

"What's going on?" Sue gasped. "Who's shooting?"

Marshall turned his attention inwards and found an answer to that question. "People who are thirsty," he answered. "About a dozen. They... They would do anything to get a hold of some water."

Sue, who had never experienced violence, looked at him aghast. “But you can’t...”

Sparks started to fly, blinding them. And a moment later—-at that very same moment, it seemed—-sparks started flying around in front of them in the desert.

Sid. He had teleported to where the attackers were. They heard a piercing scream, as if someone had suddenly seen a ghost. This was followed by a dull thud and sparks.

The teen returned amid more sparks and a surge of very hot air. In his hands was an assault rifle he had confiscated from the attackers.

Bullets hailed down on them once again. This time, the assailants were firing lower but not low enough to hit them.

“Go to hell! Sid yelled. He lifted his weapon and fired into the night without aiming at anything in particular, and way too high. It might have been mistaken for bad aim caused by the panic and inexperience on the shooter’s part, but Marshall could sense the thoughts going through the boy’s mind, and he knew that Sid did not want to kill anyone. He only wanted to scare the attackers off.

But it was no use. Their assailants’ thirst was too strong for anything to scare them off now.

“They’re coming closer!” Wuriu Sengu yelled. “They’re running from cover to cover”. He had his eyes closed and was looking through the rocks with the help of his powers. There was another volley from a higher vantage point, and the shooter was aiming to kill.

Marshall heard something similar to hailstones rattling against the ground, and turning, he saw the deadly bullets rebound off an invisible barrier before falling, flattened. He turned his head and saw that Anne was lying on her back. The veins on her forehead were standing out, and her skin was shiny and moist. The woman had saved his life with a telekinetic shield.

For now.

The attackers drew ever closer. It was clear they were not going to give up.

Marshall realized there was only one option—-they would have to give up.

“They want our water,” he said loudly, “not our lives. So let them have it.”

“Damn!” Sid cursed. “That damned Timucin! We should never have trusted him!”

“We didn’t trust him!” John countered. He went through his bags, found a handkerchief, and pulled it out.

“What do you want with that?” Sid asked.

“I’m waving the white flag. We’re surrendering.”

“No! I’ll teleport us away from here.”

John shook his head. “Forget it. You already did two jumps, and there are four of us plus all the equipment. You’ll never manage it.”

“I will!”

“And what if you don’t? Then one or two of us will be left behind. Is that what you want?”

“No!”

“So…”

Sid lifted his assault rifle. “We’ll allow them to get closer! If they want our water, they’ll have to come up close. Then I can’t miss them!”

“Sid, no!” Sue hissed. “That’s murder!”

“We’re only defending ourselves! And Rhodan needs us! We mustn’t give up! Wuriu, help me!” Sid whirled around and aimed

into the night with his rifle. “Tell me where they’re hiding!”

Wuriu man hesitated, his eyes looking at Marshall, then at Sid, and then back at Marshall again.

Suddenly, they could hear the loud humming sound of struggling electric motors. Three very bright lights came into view, speeding low across the desert floor, before stopping abruptly between the mutants and their attackers.

It was Anne Sloane, come to rescue them. With the help of her telekinetic powers, she tore the assault rifle from Sid’s hands. The weapon dug deep into the sand like a bullet itself. As if by magic, the hole closed over the weapon—-one second before the headlamps were directed straight at the hollow in the ground, illuminating everything with their all-revealing, glaring light.

The silhouette of a man emerged from the light of the headlamps. It was a Chinese officer, young, dashing, and commanding. His uniform was impeccable, as if he had just come from a parade.

“What’s going on here?” he asked in almost accent-free English.

Marshall nodded to his companions. Slowly, they stood up, lifting themselves out of the dust. They had raised their hands above their heads, although nobody had ordered them to do so.

“We were attacked,” Marshall explained. “They wanted our water.” His powers warned him that it was better to tell the truth. The man who was standing opposite him had a sharp mind, and he did not take kindly to excuses.

“Your water…” His facial features changed, expressing disgust but also exhaustion. He had had enough. Marshall caught some scraps of his thoughts and found that the officer would have preferred to handle the ragged bunch before him with weapons.

Goosebumps formed on his skin.

Then the officer shook his head in admonishment. “How pathetic you are. And you want to create a better world?” He lifted his hand.

The SUV came closer with a light buzzing sound. “Let me give you some good advice. You’ve gotten off lightly this once. Take the hint and go home!”

He climbed into the passenger seat of the SUV. The vehicle turned around and drove away.

The mutants followed him silently with their eyes, until Marshall’s knees gave way beneath him, and he fell to the sand.

“John!” Sue was the first to reach his side. “Is everything okay?” She bent over him. “He’s gone. Everything’s okay!”

The telepath groaned. “No, nothing is okay.”

“Why? He didn’t want to do anything bad to us!”

“That... That was He Jian-Dong...” It cost him a great deal of effort to speak the words. His tongue was just as little under his control as the rest of his muscles were. “He’s General Bai Jun’s adjutant.”

“And? What about it?”

“I... I read his thoughts!”

9.

The past

The place seemed like paradise to Clifford Monterny.

It was a large room with high ceilings, and a pleasant wind coming from outside caressed his skin. It smelled like the nearby Pacific.

There were three basket chairs standing in the middle of the room with a low table between them. Monterny had fetched them from the terrace. While the wind was pleasant, it got in the way of what they wanted to do.

A carafe of chilled water and two glasses were sitting on the table. When you lifted your head, you could look through the open double doors onto the terrace across the hills of Hawaii, all the way down to the ocean, which was concealed behind a bank of mist. The walls shone in a warm pink.

It looked like a vacation resort, but appearances can be deceptive. Tripler Army Medical Center was the largest clinic of the US Army in the Pacific region, designed to hold two thousand patients and the ideal place to conceal Project Brain Drain. Less than a handful of people knew what really went on there. The US President, the Minister for Homeland Security, he—-Clifford Monterny—-and of course, Ivanhoe. Or more precisely, Dr. Goratchin, as he now had to address his old comrade in public.

There was a knock on the door.

“Enter!” Monterny said.

It opened and a small Latina woman stepped reluctantly into the room. “Good morning, Clifford. Am I too late?”

“You’re right on time, Inéz. Please, take a seat!”

The woman balanced herself on the edge of one of the armchairs.

She looked as if she was getting ready to run at any moment, as if she didn't trust this paradise she found herself in.

Like Clifford, Inéz was also a veteran. Like him, she had some very hard years behind her, had been unable to get back on her feet after returning to the country she had fought for.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you!"

"I'm glad." He lifted the carafe. "May I?"

She nodded, and he filled her glass.

"Okay, can we get started?" he asked.

"Yes."

He could hear hesitation in her voice. "But?" In the year he had been working on Project Brain Drain, he had learned to listen very carefully.

"Will..." she looked at the empty basket chair. "Will Dr. Goratchin be joining us for the meeting?"

"No." He smiled reassuringly. "Dr. Goratchin sends his apologies. He has to be somewhere else."

That was a lie. In reality, he and Ivanhoe had had an argument, and it had taken some effort for Monterny to persuade his old friend not to take part in the meeting. Dr. Goratchin was someone who commanded respect among the patients, but they also feared him. Monterny, on the other hand, was one of them. His disfigured face left no doubt about that.

He picked up the clipboard. "Inéz, today we want to speak about the day you were injured."

She nodded with a look in her eyes that told him she was trying to muster her courage.

“Do you think you’re strong enough to do that?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Why don’t you tell me how the day began?”

The hours before she was wounded were not important, but Monterny knew that Inéz needed some time to work towards that moment—-that was the only way she would be able to make a breakthrough. He listened patiently to her detailed, intricate report.

Like the other dozen or so patients who had been allocated to the project, Inéz had sustained serious injuries, and Ivanhoe and Monterny hoped that these injuries had moved something deep inside her...that they had opened doors whose existence she could never have imagined.

Inéz had been part of a logistics unit. The building where her unit was spending the night had collapsed after a rocket attack, burying her and four other soldiers under the rubble in the process. Her comrades had been crushed while she had miraculously survived. Monterny wanted to take a closer look at this miracle in order to discover ways in which it might be repeated.

“... there was a loud bang and then a rumbling noise,” the veteran said. “All of a sudden, the roof caved in on top of me and...and...” She stopped speaking.

“And then?” Monterny encouraged her. “What happened next?”

“I... I can’t remember.”

“I know what that feels like. But the memories do come back if you just try a little harder.”

“I felt something hit my head.” She clutched at the arms of the basket chair until her knuckles turned white.

Monterny nodded. It was the brick that had caused her brain trauma. “But there was more, wasn’t there?”

“I...”

“You were conscious the entire time, weren’t you, Inéz?” He leaned in towards her.

“I believe so.”

“What about the beam?”

Her eyes widened. “I don’t know what you’re talking about…”

“The beam, Inéz. The rescue team found you in a hollow space that had formed beneath the ruins. There was a beam lying beside you that weighed several hundred pounds.”

“I was lucky. It missed me.”

He leaned in even closer. “You were lucky. But it wasn’t the usual kind of luck. The beam landed right across your chest. It broke some of your ribs.”

She moved away from him a little. “I must have pushed it away.”

“Something weighing several hundred pounds? How can that be possible?”

“I was scared to death! That must have given me superhuman strength.”

Monterny nodded slowly. “In some respect, yes.” He took her hands. She did not protest. They were shaking and sticky with sweat. “Inéz, help me! *Please!*”

She winced. The shaking stopped and she sat up straight.

“*Please* help me!” he repeated. “We have to find out what happened. For you sake, Inéz. And to help the many others. You want that too, don’t you? To help?”

“Yes, to help…” Her voice was flat.

“Inéz, I have a hunch. Do you want to hear it?”

She said nothing.

“The beam was pressing down on your chest, suffocating you. It was a death sentence. Your body mustered all the strength it could. Your body *and* your mind. Buried under the ruins, you discovered you had powers that seem to be not of this world. With the help of those powers, you managed to lift up the beam and move it to the side, isn’t that right?”

She squeezed his hands even tighter, her fingernails digging painfully into his flesh.

“Inéz,” he said, “you have not lost your mind. You can tell me the truth. I understand you. I also discovered that I had powers I didn’t know were possible.”

She raised her eyes and gazed at him with a surprised look on her face. Then the tears came, and she wept with relief. Monterny held her hands and waited.

Finally, she asked him, “Can you move things too, Mr. Monterny?”

“No. Not in a physical sense.” He let go of her hands, took the clipboard, and loosened one of the sheets of paper on it. He set it down on the small table.

“Inéz, please lift this sheet of paper using your powers!”

She no longer offered any resistance. She trusted him. As she focused all her concentration on the surface of the table, sweat ran down her forehead and flowed into her eyes, causing them to tear up again. She breathed heavily. At that moment, she reminded Monterny of a weightlifter about to attempt a new record.

The sheet of paper lifted from the table and floated horizontally in mid-air about a hand’s breadth above the tabletop. Its surface was completely level, as if it were resting on an invisible flat surface.

Seconds passed. Inéz held her breath…and then her concentration started to dwindle. With an unpleasant crackling noise, the sheet scrunched up and fell onto the table.

Inéz sighed, slumped into her chair, and wept uncontrollably.

Monterny went to her and took her in his arms. “It’s okay, Inéz. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“Inéz Girandole has the power!”

Clifford Monterny was in Ivanhoe’s office watching a video recording of the session with his comrade. He was beaming with enthusiasm. It was the breakthrough they had long been waiting for.

Goratchin folded his arms. “A sheet of paper! For ten seconds! Great!”

Monterny paused the video. The still image showed the female veteran’s face distorted with effort and the sheet hovering above the table as if held by a ghostly hand.

“It’s a start!” His old comrade’s cynicism disappointed him. What was wrong with Ivanhoe? “She has the power. That’s what counts.”

“I wish that was the case. But I don’t need cheap magic tricks. I need results!”

“It’s not a magic trick! It’s real. Inéz Girandole has the power of telekinesis! And we have another three wounded who are going to have a breakthrough any day now!”

“Of course. If you can convince them...”

Goratchin said it quietly, but it was enough. Ivanhoe knew his old comrade understood what he was implying.

Monterny swallowed. “Inéz lifted the sheet of paper, not me!” he protested.

“But she only managed it with your help! Your power gave her the strength to do it.”

“There’s no evidence of that!”

“Not yet.”

“You’re being unfair!”

Ivanhoe gave him a sharp look. “I am being rational. You forget that I am a scientist. I trained for many years at an elite university.”

While you spent your time hiding away from the world! The accusation hung in the air but remained unspoken. Ivanhoe had made something of himself. He had earned the title of doctor and launched Project Brain Drain, which he ran—-and yet Clifford Monterny, the deformed one, the failure, left him standing.

The patients loved Monterny. And they trusted him. Goratchin had not achieved anything like the breakthrough with Inéz in the five years he had been there. He was jealous.

“Even as a scientist, you should not forget that we are dealing with human beings who have been through terrible things!”

“Just like I have been, if I may remind you.”

Goratchin stood up and started walking back and forth. There was not enough space for him to move. His office was buried under a mountain of paper, countless printouts piled up in irregular bundles and taking over almost the entire floor. He worked seven days a week. Month after month, year after year.

“I also have to deal with people. Powerful people who finally want to see results. Project Brain Drain is hanging on by a thread. It was difficult enough to even get it off the ground, to convince the people who mattered that these powers are not just hocus pocus!”

“They aren’t. You’re not hocus pocus, Ivanhoe. Nor am I. And that there,” Monterny pointed towards the image frozen on the video screen, “is also not hocus pocus. These powers exist, and they are activated by brain trauma. Inéz is that last piece of evidence we were lacking.”

“A sheet of paper. After five years.”

“I already said, it’s a start. Give it time!”

Goratchin swirled around to face him. “Time is what we don’t have! Our funding is running out. The government gives us money because they hope we will be able to make a meaningful contribution to national security. That there…” He glanced at the screen with a contemptuous look on his face. “…is a bad joke. Are we supposed to attack the Russians with telekinetically driven sheets of paper?”

Goratchin turned away and looked out the window, which offered him the usual view of paradise. “I’m afraid,” he said finally, “it’s time for a change of tack.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We have a theory, do we not? That special powers exist. They are buried but can be activated by brain trauma.”

“Yes, and?”

“And a second factor plays a role: fear of death. Something we have failed to take into account so far. We can’t afford to do that anymore.”

“Ivanhoe, what are you trying to tell me?” Monterny jumped up. He had an idea, but what his friend had in mind was surely impossible.

“So far we have limited ourselves to good care, talking, and asking intensely, with very limited success. Because the decisive factor has been missing: the fear of death.”

“You want to threaten the patients? That… They’ll never let you do that!”

“Who says we’re going to tell anyone about it? A fire, the origins of which remain unexplainable…”

“You want to abuse your own powers!”

“No, I want to use them for a greater purpose. We need a real breakthrough!”

“At the cost of human lives?”

“Not necessarily. A fire can be controlled when you know how to handle it.”

Ivanhoe was serious. It was a panicked reaction, a decision that had been slumbering in him for some time. And it was a decision that he wasn’t going to be dissuaded from pursuing, at least not by the usual means.

Monterny concentrated and gathered together his mental strength in order to emphasize his next words: “*Please,* Ivanhoe, don’t do it! It’s wrong!”

Goratchin shook his head slowly. “Spare yourself the effort. I’m immune to your powers.”

Monterny thought about Inéz, shaking as he held her in his arms, her suffering. He thought about the suffering that other veterans had been through, about his own anguish.

Ivanhoe wanted to subject them to more of it. Ivanhoe, the man who had risked his life to save an unconscious child from a street in Baghdad. Ivanhoe, who had rescued him. Ivanhoe, the chivalrous knight.

Where was he now?

Monterny sought eye contact and said, “I don’t understand you. You’re not the man who was once my friend.”

He turned away, but Goratchin held him back. “Clifford, don’t leave!” His voice was imploring. He had upset his old comrade.

“Why? We have nothing else to say to one another.”

“I want to show you something.”

“What? A new combustion trick?”

“No. Something that will help you understand.”

Clifford Monterny followed Ivanhoe through the clinic. They remained silent the entire time.

Monterny stayed a step behind the giant, unable to take his eyes off him. This was no longer the hero he had once known. He wanted nothing to do with this man before him. He was following him merely for the sake of the man he had once been.

He decided to take a look at what Ivanhoe wanted to show him and then go, leave Brain Drain behind. He would get by somehow.

It was inevitable that it would end with him leaving. What could Ivanhoe show him? An entire building instead of derelict trailers bursting into flames? Whatever he might be planning, it would only be blind destruction, nothing more.

Time dragged on, and they moved from floor to floor several times. Tripler was huge, built in the last century after the attack on Pearl Harbour, designed to take in thousands of wounded at once.

Ivanhoe ignored the exits—-something Monterny wondered about. Did the Russian not want to take him to an open space where he could demonstrate his powers with fire undisturbed? Or was he intending to bring him to a superior, some general who would tell Monterny that drastic measures now had to be taken for the greater good of the nation?

Ivanhoe ignored the administration wing as well. Finally they arrived at the rehabilitation unit, and. Ivanhoe slowed his pace. A male nurse came towards them, greeted Ivanhoe in a friendly tone, and the two exchanged a few pleasantries. It was only meaningless smalltalk, but it was carried out in the genuine warm-hearted tone that had once distinguished Monterny's friend. And there was a familiarity between the two, which left no doubt that Ivanhoe and the nurse knew each other well.

Ivanhoe often went to the rehabilitation unit.

"What do you want here?" Monterny asked.

“You’ll see in a minute.” He held open the door to a patient’s room. The patient’s name was on a plaque at eye-level: I. Goratchin.

Monterny felt as if an invisible hand was tightening around his throat. Ivanhoe knocked on the door and waited—- Monterny did not hear anyone say “Enter”--then the door opened.

Monterny had to force himself to follow his old comrade, and

Ivanhoe closed the door behind them.

It was a normal hospital room. The windows looked out onto the rear of the building offering a view across the green, mist-covered mountains, which were every bit as beautiful to behold as the ocean.

A single bed stood in the middle of the room. There was medical equipment on one side of it that hummed and buzzed lightly. Tubes ran from there to the bed where someone was lying.

“You can move in closer,” Ivanhoe said quietly.

Monterny did so and looked at the person lying there.

It was Ivanhoe.

The man was huge, a giant, and strong, with thick black hair. and his skin shimmered in the light of the evening sun with a slightly green hue.

Monterny looked at Ivanhoe, then at the man in the bed, then back at his comrade. They were identical.

“Who’s that?” he asked.

“My twin brother, Ivan. I told you about him, did I not?”

He had. Back then in Iraq. Ivanhoe had not said a word about his brother since their reunion, and Monterney had not thought to ask about him. He had been so involved in his new unexpected life working on Project Brain Drain.

“Ivan was in Afghanistan when we were in Iraq. He was wounded three days after us. He was in a convoy and his vehicle got hit by an explosive device. The usual.”

“What happened to him?”

Ivan Goratchin seemed unharmed and just as strong as his twin brother, only a little paler than Ivanhoe, who already had a very pallid skin tone. But unlike Ivanhoe, his facial features looked peaceful, his troubles having left no furrows in his flesh.

“He received a number of superficial scratches. Three fractures, which already healed a long time ago. He also sustained a severe brain trauma. Which is why he’s in a coma.”

“For more than twenty years?”

Yes, nobody can help him. The doctors have tried everything.”

“Everything?” Monterny thought back to his time at the Walter Reed Hospital. They had looked after him well, only to send him back onto the street before he was ready. The rush of wounded was too overwhelming, the costs too high.

“Everything.” Ivanhoe nodded. “It was one of the conditions I laid down for providing the government access to my special powers. They said yes. It was clear to them that they couldn’t force a man like me to do anything I didn’t want to...”

He took his brother’s hand in his and held it gently, playing with the fingers.

“But my bargaining chip won’t last forever. If Project Brain Drain doesn’t show real progress soon, then it’s over. For Ivan as well.”

Monterny looked at the man in the bed. If there had not been any tubes or medical devices, one could mistakenly think he was just enjoying a peaceful nap.

“Is...” He tried to find the right words. “Is Ivan still there?”

“Yes. I can feel it. Ivan and I are twins but not usual twins.” He

laid his hand gently on his brother's, stood up, and pulled up his shirt. There was a long scar running down the side of his upper body. "We were joined at birth, separated by surgeons when we were six years old. It was the only way to save our lives. But the pain of separation is as intense now as it was in those very first moments. Ivan is a part of me. And I am a part of him." He pulled his shirt down again. "That's how I know he's still there. And that we can get him back again. If we only manage to get through to him."

"How are we supposed to do that? The doctors…"

"The doctors have my fullest respect. If it weren't for them, Ivan would have been dead long ago. But they are just normal human beings. They're not like we are, Clifford." He placed one of his hands on the side of his head. "We have special powers. Powers we can share. Like you did with Inéz Girandole today. Her powers are weak. It was you who gave her the decisive push. You joined the strength of your minds."

Is that what he had done? Monterny couldn't say. The only thing he was sure of was that he had wanted the female veteran to lift the sheet.

"Just imagine," Ivanhoe continued, "if we found more people whose powers are as strong as ours. There would be no limit to what we could achieve! Together, we could get through to Ivan and bring him back to life! Do you understand me now?"

Monterny felt sick. The ground beneath his feet seemed to sway, and it was no longer steady underfoot. He felt envious. Monterny also had a brother but only in name. His own brother meant nothing to him. He would have done everything to have a brother who was also a soulmate like Ivanhoe did. Even if he was in a coma. And he would do anything for such a brother. Anything.

But he did not have a brother like that. No longer. The memories of his childhood, of the familiarity, were long gone. Blown away by the explosion in Iraq. Ivanhoe still had his memories. He would never forget the way he had played with Ivan, how they had used their powers to light damp matches without realizing that it was

actually impossible. The...

He thought of something. Ivanhoe and Ivan already had their powers when they were children. A still underdeveloped yet strong power. And suddenly Clifford Monterny understood:

The principles upon which Project Brain Drain was founded were not faulty, but the conclusions drawn from it were.

“Ivanhoe,” he said, “you’re right. We must take Project Brain Drain to the next step …”

10.

July 11, 2036

John Marshall's companions surrounded him.

Once the shivering had died down, he sat up straight. Sue supported him with her healthy arm, and her touch did him good. It was almost as if her caring was transformed into strength that he could draw on.

Sid kneeled down beside him. "The General's adjutant? What's he doing out here?"

"He's preparing to withdraw the troops."

Sid's pupils widened in surprise. "What? Are you serious? The Chinese are giving up?"

Marshall shook his head. "No, they're ramping up the siege."

"How?" Anne asked. She had sunk to the desert floor next to Sid.

Marshall avoided making eye contact with her. Anne Sloane fascinated him, but this was neither the time nor the place to give that any further consideration.

"The Chinese have dug tunnels everywhere, and they're heading towards the landing zone. They had hoped to be able to dig beneath the energy shield itself. But it didn't work. The shield is a globe, and we can only see the top half of it."

"So that's the problem?" Sid asked. "They can't get through. Either aboveground or underground!"

"The Chinese see things differently. Nuclear warheads are hidden in one of the tunnels, and they're going to go off in ninety minutes."

The group's reaction to his words was one of shocked silence. Sue was the first to find her voice.

“But they can’t do that! This place is full of people!”

“The leadership and the adjutant don’t care about them. You saw what He Jian-Dong is like. We’re nothing but vermin to him. Vermin—-that’s what he called us. As far as he’s concerned, it’s our own fault if something happens to us.”

Sue swallowed. “And the soldiers? If the Chinese are only starting to withdraw them now, they’ll never get out in time!”

“Not all of them,” Marshall answered. “But the adjutant doesn’t care about them either. Soldiers are there to die for a higher cause if necessary. And anyway, he doesn’t think he’s to blame. He is only following the orders given to him by the secret service. Over General Bai Jun’s head, which is why he has to prepare the withdrawal in secret. He thinks he’s a good guy for even withdrawing troops at all, since it’s in defiance of the secret service’s orders.”

Sue pointed the stump of her arm to her forehead. “Have they all gone insane here?”

“Looks like it.”

Tears welled up in Sue’s eyes, and she suppressed a whimper. Once she had herself under control again, she said, “You’re probably thirsty, John. I’ll get you something to drink.”

She rushed over to the backpacks, looking for an excuse to do something. It was all too much for the girl.

Wuriu Sengu whispered, “We have to get out of here! Immediately!” The Japanese man was deathly pale. He was scared. Was it his fear of the radioactivity that had killed his mother and turned him into a mutant?

“No!” Sid insisted. “We can’t abandon these people to a fate like that. We just can’t!”

“Sid’s right,” Anne agreed. “We can’t just run away from this. Our knowledge means responsibility. We have to find those warheads and deactivate them!”

“John, were you able to read the positions of the warheads in the adjutant’s thoughts?” Sid asked.

Marshall lowered his head, as if in shame. “No, I’m sorry. It was all such a surprise. I haven’t been able to read a single cohesive thought from anyone’s mind all day. And then suddenly the…”

“Can you read the adjutant’s thoughts now?” Anne asked.

“When there are tens of thousands of people so close? No, that’s impossible.”

“Can you at least locate his position?”

Marshall thought about that. “Perhaps. With a little luck.”

Sid balled his right fist and punched the open palm of his left hand. “Okay, let’s go! Find him, John. I’ll teleport to where he is and get a hold of the scoundrel!”

“I said ‘perhaps’. It could take hours to find out exactly where he is. If I even manage it.” He looked up again. “And anyway, I doubt that will help us further. He Jian-Dong won’t surrender. He is a patriot, so he considers it his duty to set off those warheads. He thinks he’s doing a good thing.”

“Even if he kills thousands of his fellow Chinese soldiers by doing so?” Anne interjected.

“Even then. He will not help us to stop the time fuse.”

“He doesn’t have to. He only has to think about it. He doesn’t know that you can read minds, John.”

“You think that’s enough?”

Sid shrugged. “If not, it doesn’t matter. I’ll jump over to the warheads and then jump away with them. There’s so much desert out here that even an atomic bomb can’t do that much damage.”

“Farther away from here, yes,” Marshall agreed. “But I doubt you would get very far.” He tried to make eye contact with the boy. Sid

turned his head away. “You can’t manage it, Sid. You wouldn’t be able to jump very far with the warheads—-and you would just make everything worse. They would explode close by, *above* the surface. Do you know what that means? A much larger circle of destruction. And a pressure and heat wave with nothing in this landscape to slow it down. And radioactive fallout that would make the entire region uninhabitable. We can’t risk it!”

Sid stood up and started pacing to and fro. “But that can’t be it! We can’t just put our tails between our legs, run away, and let the thing explode! We’re mutants! We possess superhuman powers! There’s no way we can’t find a way to get this done!” He kicked a stone, which clattered a few meters across the ground, throwing up little whirlwinds of sand along the way.

“There is an option,” Marshall said.

“And what would that be?” Anne asked.

“We leave our powers by the wayside for now and go in search of the general”.

Sid whirled around. “We’re supposed to just give up? Have you gone mad?”

“Who says we give up? Use your brain! Put yourself in the general’s shoes. You’re in charge of the siege, and then you find out your own adjutant has gone behind your back and hidden warheads that will ruin your plans and possibly cost tens of thousands of people their lives. What would you do?”

“I would have the guy shot!” Sid spat out. The boy was totally serious, but Marshall knew Sid well enough to know that he didn’t really mean it. The boy had a hot temper. By verbalizing threats like that, he was making sure he would not turn them into actions.

“Possibly. But before that, if I were him, I would make sure that the traitor helped me to prevent the explosion. And, as the senior commander, he has the specialists, resources and know-how to stop a time fuse, doesn’t he?”

Anne and Wuriu nodded. Sid shook his head fiercely. “No! That won’t work!”

“You don’t really believe the general can prevent the explosion?”

“Yes, I do…but first of all, I don’t think he’ll believe us. He has nothing more than our word. Why should he? And, secondly, we would be done for. The Chinese will never let us go if they find out about our powers. Do you want us to end up as lab rats for their scientists? I don’t! I’d rather let myself be burned to death by an atomic bomb!”

He was serious. The boy had spent years in a Homeland Security camp. His maltreated hands would never allow him to forget what crimes human beings are capable of when they were convinced that the ends they pursue justified the means.

John Marshall could not think of an answer. The crowd fell into silence as the mutants went remained deep in thought.

Marshall swallowed. It hurt. Sand had become stuck inside of his throat. He reached for the bottle in his belt. But…had Sue not gone to fetch water?

He turned around and looked towards the backpacks. Nobody was there.

John cleared his throat and asked, “Where is Sue, by the way?”

11.

July 11, 2036

"You have news for me?"

Clifford Monterny entered the circular room. The variable domed ceiling was open, offering an expansive view of the sky. Twilight was coming on, and it wouldn't be long before the first stars began to sparkle and the broad ribbon of the Milky Way became visible, stretching across the night sky.

The Adirondack mountains were very isolated. And the air pollution that otherwise blocked the view into infinity was far away.

Dr. Manoli and Dr. Haggard turned around. They were wearing white lab coats and looked less like prisoners and more like a couple of doctors fighting for the life of a patient.

"Yes, we believe so," Manoli said.

The two were standing at the side of Ivan Goratchin's hospital bed, blocking Monterny's line of vision. But even if the two men had stepped aside, the mutant would have seen very little of his dead companion's twin brother. A high bed frame surrounded the mattress. It was designed as a precaution in the unlikely case the patient suddenly moved after decades of immobility and risked falling out. Bundles of cables and other lines led into the bed. Most of them were attached to electrodes that registered every sign of life in Ivan Goratchin.

The results of their measurements were shown on a wall of displays situated at the opposite edge of the bed, which made one thing clear: Ivan Goratchin was alive. His condition was stable, and he was able to breathe without the aid of a machine.

The displays also showed another fact, namely that he was existing at the lowest conceivable level of what could be called life.

In a coma. Since that day almost thirty years ago when the explosive device had gone off in Afghanistan, shattering his brain.

Monterny walked over to the coma patient, took his hand and squeezed it gently like he always did.

“We’ve studied his medical records in great detail,” Dr. Haggard said. The physician had an athletic build and looked younger than his forty years. He could have been mistaken for a professional athlete if it weren’t for the alert, inquisitive look in his eyes that revealed the researcher in him.

“It’s an impressive record,” Manoli added.

He was a slim man with no particularly distinguishing features. You would never have believed just from looking at him that he had flown to the moon with Perry Rhodan. But Eric Manoli was not a man to be underestimated. He had an extremely determined nature. If he had not had the courage to intervene, Crest da Zoltral would have died of his ailment.

“There is literally no treatment that hasn’t been tried on Mr. Goratchin.”

Monterny let go of Ivan’s hand and took a step back. “Ivan had a twin brother. Ivanhoe ... Ivanovich did everything in his power to help his brother. And this task has fallen to me since his death. I am merely fulfilling my obligations to a dead friend, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Mr. Goratchin is in excellent physical condition,” said Dr. Haggard. “I have to admit that I would not have thought it possible for a person who has been in a coma for so long to stay in such good physical shape.”

“That’s no thanks to me.” Monterny pointed at the array of machines surrounding the bed. “Ivanhoe was obsessed with fitness training. He used his knowledge of that to translate his own experiences into treatment for his brother. These autonomous machines train nearly every muscle in Ivan’s body.” He looked at Ivan. Despite being in a coma, he had a fresh and healthy look

about him, giving the impression that he could wake up at any moment, rip the tangle of electrodes, wires and tubes from his body and lead a normal life again. “Shortly before his death, Ivanhoe set up a foundation. It handles the patents for these machines and makes sure that patients worldwide benefit from them irrespective of their financial means.”

“Mr. Goratchin’s brother must have been a remarkable man.”

“Yes, he was. His death was a great loss for us all. He had so much to offer to humanity.” Monterny turned his head away as the tears welled up in the corners of his eyes. He wiped them away. “But we’re not here to speak about the dead. We must concentrate on the living. What do you have to tell me?”

He received no answer. The two doctors exchanged furtive looks, as if each of them hoped the other would be the first to speak.

Manoli finally composed himself and answered. “The prognosis is not good,” he said quietly.

“You don’t have to whisper, Dr. Manoli. I’ve been hearing the same words from doctors for years now. What I want to know from the two of you is whether there is any chance at all, no matter how narrow, that he will recover?”

“Maybe,” Haggard replied. “But even that slim chance is fraught with risks.”

“I’m willing to take those risks. Ivanhoe would have been too. He was a man who did not shy away from risks if they were justified for the matter at hand. He always saw the opportunities, not the dangers. I’m sure that Ivan is like him.”

Monterny’s eyes remained on the man in a coma. He often thought he could see Ivanhoe in Ivan. It was hardly any wonder. The two were identical twins. However, what Monterny still wondered about after years and countless hours by the coma patient’s bedside was the peacefulness of Ivan’s facial features. The man lay in a coma from which he might never wake up, but he had also been spared a lot of things. His brother had failed because of

his own high expectations, and he had died a bitter man.

“We believe that stimulating Mr. Goratchin’s brain via electrodes to be the most promising way to proceed,” Dr. Manoli offered.

Monterny found it very difficult to hide his disappointment. “Other doctors have tried that. Multiple times.”

“We’re aware of that. *Almost every conceivable* thing has already been tried on Mr. Goratchin. But the progress made in medicine in recent years has been phenomenal. We might not have reinvented the wheel, but we’ve found many ways to adjust it, to fine-tune it.”

“And that means?”

“What that means,” Dr. Haggard interjected, “is that we believe so-called ‘deep brain electrical stimulation’ still has a great deal of potential. Evidence has shown in the last years that an increased electrical current in connection with certain patterns of stimulation can bring about surprising results.”

“What are you waiting for, then?”

“We want to be fully clear about the risks involved. It will be necessary to insert an electrode into Mr. Goratchin’s thalamus.”

“Why? He has already had several such operations already. Use one of the already implanted electrodes!”

“We would prefer to do that”, Dr. Manoli answered. “Every surgical intervention in the human brain involves high risk. But the implanted equipment is no longer in a functioning state. Additionally, we believe the exact position of the electrode is vital. We urgently suggest that a specialist surgeon be charged with the task.”

Monterny said nothing. It would be well-advised to follow the recommendations given by the two doctors. It was true they were his prisoners, but they could not know that the comatose Ivan Goratchin might be linked in some way to their own fates or the fate of Crest. To them, he was simply a person who needed their help. No more and no less. The advice they had given was honest

and in all probability, medically correct.

There was one thing, however: it was impossible for Monterny to engage anyone from outside. Ivan Goratchin had been officially dead for a very long time. The mutant had kept him alive by secretly channelling money that was earmarked for running Fort Sunrise.

He shook his head. “A specialist won’t be necessary. I trust you.”

The two men exchanged a look again and nodded. They had expected his reaction.

“As you wish,” Dr. Manoli said. “But we must emphasize once again, the operation is highly risky—-and the stimulation itself is little more than an experiment. It could awaken Mr. Goratchin. Or it could kill him.”

“I understand that. But don’t we all have to die sometime?”

For several seconds, the three men said nothing, looking at the coma patient who lay there oblivious to what was happening around him, oblivious to the fact that decisions were being made that would determine his fate.

“Okay, we’ll risk the surgery,” Dr. Haggard finally said.

“Thank you, on Ivan’s behalf. When do you want to do the operation?”

“As soon as possible. And in the meantime, you should think about what ideas you can bring to this, Monterny.”

“Me?” the mutant responded, surprised. “What could I possibly contribute?”

“A great deal. Possibly even the most important thing.” Haggard gestured in a way that took in the entire room. “Your dedication is impressive. Even if I find it difficult to admit, considering the situation we’re in. This machinery, the room with the open ceiling... They act as stimuli. We believe they’re vital to Mr. Goratchin’s survival. We don’t know to what extent he is aware of what is going

on around him, but we're certain that even the smallest details count."

"What can I do?"

"Well, I've noticed that you speak to him..." Haggard said hesitatingly, as if he feared that this very private observation might incite anger.

"Your observation is correct. I have been speaking to Ivan for years. Unfortunately, without results."

"*Apparently* without results," Haggard corrected him. "You have built up a relationship with him. You know him. Think about it... What stimuli could you provide? I mean, in addition to that provided by the probe."

Monterny thought about it. It was an impossible task. He had already said everything to Ivan that there was to say. He had begged him to wake up, coaxed him, even threatened him. In short, he had been through the entire range of human emotions.

"You're asking too much of me, Dr. Haggard," he admitted. "Give me some idea of what you mean."

The doctor rubbed his chin. "Perhaps a kind of shock would work. Something that would upset him. The explosion that put him in a coma was a shock..."

"And another should help to wake him up? I understand. I'll think about it."

Monterny looked at Ivan. The very idea that the man might get up and walk away from his current condition stirred up strong emotions in him. It was inconceivable. And yet when he looked back, was that not what his life had been about? Things that seemed impossible had happened time and again. Whenever he believed he had reached the end of the road, something unexpected had happened to turn the situation around.

He cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said, turning back to the doctors. "I will personally speak with the President about releasing

you as soon as possible. Can I ask you to leave me alone with Ivan for a little while?"

Manoli and Haggard reluctantly left the room. Outside, guards were waiting to return them to their cells. Once there, they would be prisoners again, abandoned to their fates and the thoughts that tormented them.

Monterny waited until the door had closed behind the two men before pulling up a threadbare stool to the side of the bed. He took Ivan's hand. The skin was soft and rosy like that of a child. And it was as big as a shovel. It took both his hands to surround the one.

Ivan Goratchin was strong, even after years of being in a coma. It was proof of how much his twin brother had loved him. Ivanhoe had done everything for him.

Ivan was impressive. The fantasy stories that Ivanhoe had devoured in his spare time would have referred to him as a giant. A tragic hero. There was a long scar all the way down the side of his body. It was not a result of war. The wound that the war had inflicted on him was invisible, and it had thrown him into a coma from which it seemed he would never wake up.

No, the scar was proof that Ivan Goratchin had once been more than one person. He and Ivanhoe had been born as conjoined twins. Destined to go through life together, and to die together, if the separation had not been successful.

Their parents had left Russia to find a new and better life in the land of endless opportunities. And they had succeeded...after a megachurch in Ohio had donated their Sunday collections to them, providing enough funds to pay for the risky operation.

It had allowed Ivan and Ivanhoe to live a normal life. But Monterny would never forget the long, oppressively hot nights in Baghdad that he had spent with his comrade. The operation, Ivanhoe had told him, had saved his life but at the same time, it had torn out a part of his very being. He and his brother belonged together. In reality, they were inseparable.

But now Ivanhoe was dead, and Monterny had taken on a burden from his old comrade that weighed heavily on his mind.

“Did you hear that, Ivan?” he asked quietly. “Dr. Manoli and Dr. Haggard think they can pull you out of your coma.”

Ivan showed no reaction. How could he? The comatose man did not hear, did not see, did not feel; he was not aware of the world around him. It was as if he no longer belonged to this world.

Did Ivan think? Did he still exist? Did his personality, his consciousness, his soul still exist? Monterny had asked Tatiana Michalovna to try and read his thoughts, but the telepath had been unable to do so. Yet she was certain she had sensed a presence, even if she was unable to grasp it.

That was sufficient for Monterny. Ivan Goratchin existed. His efforts were not in vain.

“I know, Ivan. You’ve heard promises like that so many times. Maybe too often. They’ve never been fulfilled. But this time it’s different. Manoli and Haggard are unusual men.” He stroked the blanket, smoothing out a wrinkle. “I only wish they had more knowledge about matters that lie outside the realm of medicine. But let’s wait, perhaps they will learn.”

A click automatically activated a process by which Ivan was fed. A brown pulp was pressed through a tube that disappeared below the blanket and into his belly.

“Do you know, Ivan, I’ve been thinking about things. I’ve been asking myself why you didn’t already come out of this coma long ago. Despite the countless attempts to pull you out. Your brother only wanted the best for you. He brought in the best specialists. Men and women who are just as good as Manoli and Haggard. But it was all in vain.”

Monterny looked into Ivan’s open eyes. They were empty and would have dried out long ago if one of the machines had not moistened them regularly with a fluid that imitated teardrops.

“I ask myself why. Look at you. You’re ready to step back into life. You’re strong, Ivan. But you’re still lying here. Because of a brain trauma caused by the explosion, according to the doctors.”

He squeezed Ivan’s hand tighter. “But what do doctors know? They have a limited view of things. They recognize individual phenomena, but they are unable to take a step back and look at the picture in its entirety...and to understand.”

The humming died down once the machine had pumped exactly the right amount of food into Ivan’s stomach.

“Do you know what I think? I think you like it where you are, in your own little world. You *want* to stay there, don’t you? And you have every right to do so. Why return to the world of humans with all their troubles? It’s become lonely since your brother died.”

He fell silent. Thinking about Ivanhoe’s death upset him. He would have done anything to turn the clock backwards. But that was impossible, so he concentrated his efforts on bringing Ivan back to life. And on finding Sid González, the mutant who was responsible for Julie’s and Ivanhoe’s death. He would achieve both these goals. Sooner or later.

“I think I know of a reason, Ivan,” he said. “A reason that is matched by no other: eternal life.”

Something flashed in Ivan’s eyes. A light reflex? It was the only rational explanation. But in Monterny’s experience, rationality had its limitations.

“Are you laughing? Do you think I’ve lost my mind?” He shook his head. “No, I’m not imagining it. Something’s happened, Ivan. We humans are no longer alone. Strangers have come among us. They call themselves Arkonides, and their technology is like pure magic. None of the old truths apply anymore.”

The sparkle disappeared from the coma patient’s eyes, making way for his vacant stare again.

“You don’t believe me, do you? You’re asking yourself what

these fantasy-like Arkonides want from us poor humans, aren't you? I'll tell you what. They're looking for immortality. Eternal life is within our grasp!"

He pressed Ivan's hand even tighter. "All we need is determination! We have to be prepared to fight! And you're a fighter, Ivan. Your brother was one. A fighter with an extraordinary gift."

Was that a noticeable shudder? Did the man's muscles tense up ever so slightly?

"There's no need to be afraid, Ivan. Your secret is safe with me. He told me how, when you were kids, you played with damp matches. They couldn't be lit, but you wanted more than anything else for them to burn...and so they did."

Monterny relaxed his grip a little. "When the moment comes, we will need your powers, Ivan. With all the strength you can muster."

Hey laid the hand down gently.

"But until then, sleep! Gather your strength..."

And with that, he left, filled with an optimism that he had not felt in a very long time. Not since that day when he had embarked on his mission to Iraq.

The world was waiting for Clifford Monterny. As was immortality.

12.

The Past

The Learjet prepared to land at the airport in Johannesburg.

The unique Table Mountain passed by the cabin window, but Monterny paid little attention to it. He took off his worn hiking boots, jeans and coarse shirt, exchanging them for what he referred to as his “costume”: a designer suit, designer sunglasses, designer wristwatch, each of them individually tasteful but tasteless when worn together.

Exactly what people expected from a crazy American millionaire.

He was greeted by a Black man in jeans and a shirt on the runway. His clothes reminded Monterny of those he himself had just cast off.

“Mr. Haycock? Welcome to South Africa!” The man’s voice wavered. He was trying in vain not to stare at the disfigured half of Monterny’s face. “I... I hope you had a pleasant flight.”

“It was okay”, Monterny answered, ignoring the hand the man offered him. “Your incompetent air traffic controllers made us circle for half an hour!”

“I... I’m sorry about that.” The man needed a moment to regain his composure. “I’m James Huulvig, director of the orphanage. We are extremely happy to have the honor of your visit, Mr. Haycock.”

“I should hope so!” Monterny rubbed his chin. “What are we waiting for?”

“Nothing! Nothing at all!”

An air-conditioned SUV drove up. Rented for the rich American who had gotten it into his head that he wanted to adopt a child—for a price that, according to Monterny’s estimates, would be sufficient to run the orphanage for an entire year.

A befitting welcome was awaiting the millionaire. There must have been about fifty to sixty children standing in the dusty courtyard, singing a welcoming song for the American visitor.

Monterny sat down in the armchair provided for him in the shade of a tree and, in keeping with his role, acted as if he was tolerating the show with a sense of bored arrogance.

In reality, he was paying careful attention to what was going on around him. He noticed that most of the children were barefoot, and an old source of pain flared up as he thought back to the Humvee in Iraq. He noticed their looks of longing, each of them hoping to be the one chosen to go with him to a better life in the fairytale land of America. In particular, he noticed one child, his lips pressed tightly together, staring at him with dull rage.

He waved the director over.

“Sir?”

“I know which child I want.”

“So quickly?”

“Yes. Thanks to my knowledge of human nature, it’s not difficult for me.”

“Of course, Mr. Haycock”, the director hastily agreed. “Which child has won over your heart?”

“The boy in the back row on the far right.”

“Roster Deegan?” The director tried but failed to hide his surprise.

“Yes. Is there something wrong with him?”

The man shook his head hastily. “No, no. Roster is a...well, a very strong boy. It’s just that I thought you were looking for someone younger. Roster is twelve.”

Monterny already knew that. The intel team from Project Brain

Drain had included that information in the profile of the boy they had provided him with. Apart from that, Roster was really wild, a little devil who broke everything he got his hands on—as well as some things that were out of his reach.

"I want to take a closer look at him," Monterny said. "Undisturbed."

"Of course, Mr. Haycock!"

Only a few minutes later, Monterny was sitting at the director's desk. The room had old-fashioned bookcases around the walls and was extremely clean. The computer was also old-fashioned, a gray box-like device that Monterny hadn't seen for years. A walking stick was leaning against the side of the desk. To him it seemed like the orphanage had remained stuck in the past century in more ways than one.

The door opened and Roster Deegan entered. He had demonstratively hooked his thumbs into his belt. Instead of greeting Monterny, he said, "What does a rich asshole like you want from me?"

"I want to talk to you."

"There's no point. You're not getting me. I'm staying here."

"Here? Why?"

"That's none of your business!" The boy turned red.

"I know why. You're scared, Roster."

"Me, afraid? I don't even know what that feels like."

"You're lying. You're scared of me, aren't you? I'm a stranger, and you don't know how I tick. And my face... It's horrible, isn't it?"

"I don't care about your face!"

Monterny said nothing, turning inwards to listen to his inner voice. This boy had special powers. He could sense it. He could

cajole them out of him. But not by saying please. He had to do it in a way the boy was used to.

"They beat you here," Monterny said, looking at the walking stick by the desk.

The color faded from the boy's face. "They try to!"

"Oh yes?" Monterny stood up and took the stick in his hand. "What do you mean by that? Are you trying to tell me that you're stronger than the adults?"

"Stay away from me!"

"Why? You are very ill-mannered." He took a step towards the boy.

"Stay away from me! Or I'll..."

"Or what?" Monterny did not stop.

The boy grunted. A second later the stick flew out of Monterny's hand, and bounced off the wall, causing plaster to trickle to the floor.

Clifford Monterny hadn't come in vain.

"You have powers," he whispered. He dropped to his knees so that he was at eye-level with the boy, then concentrated on his own powers. "You don't belong here, Roster. *Please,* come with me!"

The boy was exhausted from using his gifts. He was unable to fight against Monterny's mental onslaught. He nodded slowly, his pupils wide.

Monterny walked by him and into the corridor where the director was waiting.

"I'll take the boy." He gave the director an envelope filled with banknotes. In response to the questioning look on the director's face, he said, "A small compensation for your willingness to waive any unnecessary bureaucracy."

Seven hours later, the Learjet landed on the runway near San Fernando in northern Mexico. Roster Deegan had slept for most of the way. After Monterny woke him, he followed him around like a dog that was eager to learn.

Monterny was in a very good mood. Roster Deegan's powers were stronger than he had seen in any of the children they had brought to Camp Specter so far. Ivanhoe would be happy.

Someone was waiting for them on the runway. He was disappointed to see that it wasn't his friend. A second later, his heart skipped a beat.

It was Julie Ledge.

Julie had thought of everything: a blanket, drinks, food and a large umbrella, opened and sticking diagonally out of the ground, to shade them from the sun.

They had climbed upwards for an hour and now found themselves high above Camp Specter on a rocky outcrop that felt like a balcony. The perfect place for a picnic.

There was no other place Clifford Monterny wanted to be right now, at no other time and with nobody else.

"Beer?" Julie asked.

He nodded. She handed him a chilled can. He opened it and enjoyed the flavor of the drink as he watched her prepare the picnic. Julie did it the way she did everything: meticulously and without fuss.

The calls of the children echoed in the valley. It was Sunday, and they were running around the camp's large forecourt, playing football and other games. As if they were normal children. As if Camp Specter were a typical school. As if the place they called home were not surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and patrolled by guards day and night.

"It's nice to hear that despite everything, they're still just

children, isn't it?" Julie said.

He nodded.

"And even nicer to share this moment with you." She snuggled in closer to him.

He laid his arm around her. He could feel the soft beat of her heart, sense her unconditional devotion. She trusted him.

Clifford Monterny had thought he would never see Julie again. He had believed that a woman like her was out of reach for a man with such a disfigured face. But he had been wrong. As with so many things.

Admittedly, it was a different Julie he now held in his arms. She had aged. She was no longer a young woman who could have passed for a cheerleader. The first streaks of gray could be seen shimmering in her black hair. Small wrinkles had formed around her eyes. She had been through two bad marriages, three miscarriages, a traffic accident, and several setbacks in her career over the years. In other words, life had not been kind to her.

Monterny didn't care. In fact, quite the opposite was true. The suffering she had been through made her even more attractive to him.

Julie moved away from him to serve the food. A melon, tomatoes, bread, some cheese. Simple but chosen with care.

She had become an integral part of Camp Specter. His good fairy. The children loved her, and they loved going to her sessions.

She ate, enjoying this precious time together. Monterny was seldom at Camp Specter. He spent most of his time traveling all over the world seeking out children with powers to bring them to the camp.

The children's calls turned into shrill screams. They were squabbling. Julie bent forward and saw that they had formed a large circle, in the middle of which two children were fighting.

“Roster Deegan,” she said.

“How do you know?” They were too far away for Monterny to tell the children apart.

“I know it. He’s always starting fights. Roster craves attention, and that’s one way of getting it. He also likes to be the boss.”

“It’s all he knows,” Monterny responded. He remembered the orphanage in South Africa where he had found Roster Deegan. The children had to fight there just to survive.

“Roster probably didn’t have it easy.” Julie shrugged. “Who has had it easy? It’s not about where you come from, it’s about what you make of your life. And Roster could make so much out of his situation. His potential is enormous. It could open the door to exactly the recognition he craves...”

“He’s not the only one,” Monterny said. In fact, it was true of all the children at the camp. They were all orphans, without exception, and they had to learn how to cope with themselves before they could start testing their psychic potential. It wasn’t ideal, but it was the only possible way to do it. Orphans were the only children they could bring there without causing a stir.

“Elmer Bradley is already much further”, Julie said.

“Yes, but if you ask me, he’s going too far in the other direction. He thinks about things too much, is too much of a loner.”

“Not entirely. Elmer and Sid have become close friends.”

“That’s good for Elmer but not for Sid.”

“How come?”

“Elmer pulled Sid down.” Monterny wasn’t happy about the situation. Of all the children he had brought to the camp, Sid González meant the most to him. He couldn’t really say why. Despite his ability to manipulate the emotions of others, his own feelings often remained a mystery to him. “Sid perhaps has the strongest power of them all. He has already carried out several

teleportations; that's the only explanation for the story of his arrest. He just isn't aware of it because he has somehow managed to suppress that information. But one day his breakthrough will come. Of that I'm certain."

"Yes. Dr. Goratchin will be calling on Sid soon." Julie never called the Russian "Ivanhoe."

"You say that as if Sid had something to be afraid of."

Julie looked at him, looked away again, and quietly said, "I don't know anymore."

"What happened?" asked Monterny, jumping to his feet. Since he had set up Camp Specter, Ivanhoe was back to being his old self. The radiant hero. However, their near breakup in Hawaii was not forgotten.

"Nothing. Perhaps. But perhaps something has happened. Something is different. The children who come to me after their meeting with Dr. Goratchin are often distressed."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything. Ivanhoe has a certain position of respect. He has a different role than we do, and the project is extremely important to him. Maybe he comes across as too demanding."

"Yes, but...yesterday, Shanta Preston came to me. She had burns on her hands and feet."

"What? Where did she get them from?" Monterny put down his beer. It didn't taste good to him anymore.

"She wouldn't give me an answer."

"An accident in the kitchen perhaps? Or maybe she secretly played with fire?"

"That was what I thought at first. So I looked into it. She did not have any injuries when she went to see Dr. Goratchin, but the burns were there when she came back from her appointment with him."

“But that’s impossible!”

“I know. But it’s a fact.”

Monterny’s thoughts were racing. Burned. With no apparent cause. There was only one explanation for it.

“Clifford!” Julie took his hand and squeezed it. “Dr. Goratchin is your friend. Please talk to him. Please!”

“I need to talk to you, Ivanhoe!”

His old comrade looked up from the tablet on which he was reading a specialist article. Not a single day went by on which he did not work, did not continue his search to find some research results that gave them access to the powers of the children.

“Of course. What’s on your mind, Clifford?” He pointed towards the visitors’ chair standing in front of his desk.

Monterny went over to it but remained standing. He was shaking. Shaking with anger—but also fear.

“I want to talk to you about Shanta Preston!”

Ivanhoe put his tablet down and removed the reading glasses he had needed these past few months. “I was wondering when you would come about that.”

“You…” Monterny stopped. He had expected a reckoning between them, expected his friend to be a little contrite, show feelings of guilt. “The soles of her feet and her hands are burned!” he said. “What did you do with her?”

“Precisely what you think I did.” Ivanhoe looked him straight in the eye. “I used my powers.”

“How could you do that?!” Monterny yelled. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Didn’t want to believe his ears. What had become of the man who had risked his life to rescue a child that he didn’t even know was still alive?

“Calm down, Clifford. There’s no need to make a drama out of it. The burns are superficial, and they will heal without leaving any traces. A perfectly normal childhood experience. No worse than burning a finger on a hot stove.”

“This was no accident! *You* burned her! You have no right to do that! We brought the children here, and we are responsible for them. They trust us as if we’re their parents. And if we betray that trust, we will be betraying everything we believe in!”

Ivanhoe looked at Monterny with pity in his eyes. “I’m afraid you’re not up to date on things.”

“Then bring me up to date!”

“I’d be pleased to.” Ivanhoe leaned back in his chair. “To put it briefly, we’ve come up against a dead end. Your idea about looking for children with powers was a stroke of genius. But, if we’re honest about it, are we really any further than we were a few years ago? No. And why not? Because the way you do things is not making any progress.”

“Unlike your medieval methods?”

Ivanhoe did not react to the accusation. “We find ourselves at the edges of science, at the edges of the human mind. It is only logical that we work with borderline experiences to achieve breakthroughs,”

“You’re talking about torture! If that’s the price we have to pay, then we’ll just have to close down Brain Drain.”

“We can’t do that; it would be a crime against humanity.”

“You… You …” Ivanhoe had lost his mind. Lost his way in his own ideas, let go completely of his moral compass. But how could he? Monterny suddenly thought of something. “You don’t know what you’re saying! What would your brother say if he were here?”

Ivanhoe blinked several times before regaining his composure. “It has come to be about a great deal more than just Ivan, Clifford.”

“What’s it about, then?”

“About the fate of humanity as a whole.”

“You’ve lost your mind!”

“No, I’ve become cleverer.” He rubbed his hand across the tablet, which was now switched off. “I have been studying human nature. And do you know what, Clifford? It’s not enough. We have made such enormous technological advances that earlier generations would have believed us to be gods. But we’re not divine beings. We’re just normal human beings who can no longer cope with the tools we ourselves created.” He bent forward and stared at Monterny. “Just think of the wars we wage! We humans play with things that we do not have a command of, and that makes us our own worst enemies!”

“Which is why you’ve started torturing children to save the world?”

“Your cynicism is misplaced. The human mind must make a great leap forward if it wants to gain control of the tools it has created itself. And if I have to administer carefully measured doses of pain to this or that child, then I will do it. The survival of humanity is at stake.”

It was wrong. Monterny could feel it in his gut, which was in knots, in his throat, which allowed hardly any air to pass, and in his head, which felt like it would burst.

“*Please,* Ivanhoe,” he whispered. “Don’t do it!”

“I do what I have to do. And your powers of suggestion will not stop me from continuing to do that. Nothing and nobody in this world can stop me.” He put down his pen. “But I do respect your opinion, Clifford. You are free to leave Project Brain Drain at any time. I will make sure that you are provided for financially for the rest of your life.”

Leave the project. That would mean leaving the children at Ivanhoe’s mercy. Losing Julie. Letting go of his reason for living.

“Should I?” Ivanhoe asked. He took the tablet in his hands and the display came on. “All it takes is one mail.”

“I... I...”

He should do it. He must do it, if he wasn’t to lose every ounce of self-respect.

Clifford Monterny could not do it.

13.

July 11, 2036

Cripple.

It seemed to Sue as if it was the first word she had learned. In any case it was a word she heard more often than her own name.

Cripple.

From the day she was born. A healthy baby that was unexplainably missing a hand. A baby who, because of her missing hand, had also lost what every baby had a natural right to: the love of its parents.

And it turned out not to be the only physical defect she had. Sue was now fifteen, actually in the middle of puberty. But her body seemed to have totally ignored that fact. She had stopped growing altogether somewhere between her tenth and eleventh birthdays. It was exasperating. And at the same time, it was also a form of motivation that she never let go of for a second.

She had only one hand, which meant she had to be more skilful just to keep up. And she wanted to keep up. More than anything else. Just wanted to be like everyone else. And sometimes better.

Sue was trapped in the body of a child, and she was weak and fragile, which meant she had to be more careful, more skillful and agile. She was not a teleporter like Sid, who could escape from wherever he was whenever he wanted to. She was not a telekinetic like Anne, who could keep anyone she didn't like from coming near her. And she was not telepathic like John, who sensed when others were lying and therefore never failed to find the right thing to say, the right gesture to make...so she had to make do with what she had, and that was her head. Her small, unusually clever head.

Being a teleporter was very practical, but it made you lazy. It tricked you into reducing yourself to solving every problem with

your powers. Or it made you jump away from problems. Instead of facing life. Instead of using your head, taking a deep breath and trusting yourself.

Sue ran out into the night, out into the desert, away from her quarrelling comrades, away from the gleaming dome that was the entire focus of her longing. She had to put more distance between them, move in a way that couldn't be traced. Sooner or later, John and the others would come looking for her.

The girl was light of foot as she ran. She weighed nothing and she had stamina. The water bottle she had taken with her dangled from her belt, knocking against her hips. Sue pressed the stump of her arm to the bottle, reached repeatedly with her healthy arm around her belly to touch the plastic bag she had stolen from John's backpack and tucked into the waistband of her trousers. She must not lose it. Without it, she was lost. Without it, everything was lost.

A snakelike shape made up of lights was moving to her left—the connecting road to Hohhot. Even now, just before dawn, there was busy traffic on it. Trucks and SUVs struggled across the battered road surface, leaving the landing site of the *Stardust*, which would soon be transformed into an atomic nightmare, behind them.

Very few lights were going in the other direction. But that didn't matter. All Sue needed was one single truck.

She came to a standstill, pulled the envelope out of her waistband, opened it carefully by lifting it to her mouth, and went through the bundle of notes. She took half of them, stuck the envelope back into her waistband, and rolled the bundle with the remaining money in her hand in such a way that nobody would recognize what it was. Sue then waited for her chance to come, for an interruption in the serpent of lights.

It came after a few minutes. The road was in darkness, and only one pair of headlamps was coming towards the ring of besiegers.

Sue sprinted off, jumped into the middle of the roadway, stretched her arms up high and yelled, "Stop!".

The headlamps were so bright that she had to squeeze her eyelids shut. The light came closer and closer, but the driver did not seem to be doing anything to slow down. Sue's pulse was hammering. She wanted to run away as far as she could and hide somewhere, but that was not an option. All she had were her guts. If she lost her courage now, she would lose herself.

At the very last moment, the truck came to a halt with screeching brakes. The driver turned down his headlamps and jumped out of his cabin, cursing loudly. He was speaking Chinese, and Sue did not understand a word, but she knew exactly what he was saying. What the hell did she think she was doing jumping out in front of a truck?

She hoped he spoke a little English.

"Sorry!" she called out. "I need help, please!"

The driver continued cursing.

Sue pointed to the hill on which the mast with the Chinese flag was placed. "I need to go there!"

Veins caused by his fury popped out on the driver's forehead as he became angrier and angrier. The shock he had felt at having almost run over a child upset him immensely.

"I can pay!" Sue called.

She stretched her arm out to the driver, opening her hand with the bundle of notes in it.

The driver suddenly fell silent as if someone had flicked his off switch. His eyes widened. He stared at both the bundle and Sue as if he were looking at a ghost.

"Here! For you!" Sue took a step towards the driver.

The man did not step back. Carefully he stretched out his hand and then grabbed the bundle from her. He hastily counted the money, all the time mumbling away to himself—Sue was sure she heard the words "crazy" and "freaky"—and then he stuck the

bundle into his waistband and gestured for her to climb into the passenger seat.

The truck drove off with a jerk that almost threw her against the inside of the windscreen.

The driver stopped at the foot of the hill. With a gesture, he let Sue know that the journey was over for her. For about a quarter of an hour, the truck had followed one of the ring roads formed by the heavy traffic over the past weeks.

Sue hesitated. It had been warm in the driver's cabin, almost cozy. Outside it was cold, and it was dangerous too. Again and again shots were fired in the night, and people could be heard screaming in the dark. The fighting over the last water reserves had begun.

Sue thought things over for a moment and then took the envelope out of her waistband and gave the driver the rest of the money. With a little luck, that would persuade him not to betray her to the Chinese soldiers within the next five minutes. Sue didn't need the money anyway. Where she was going, money could not help her, no matter how large the sum.

The driver fell silent with surprise as she handed him the money. He studied her suspiciously, before holding his hand up in a gesture as if to turn the money down. But then greed got the better of him, and he grabbed the envelope with a hasty "Thank you." It was the first and last words he spoke to her in English.

"You're welcome," she answered,and then added, "Good luck!" As if she was not the one who would be needing all the good luck she could get.

She opened the door, slid to the ground, and hurried off without turning around. The desert started to slope upwards. To her right she saw a serpentine road winding its way up the incline. Built by the Chinese army.

Sue kept to the left. Her pulse was racing and she felt as if there

were hundreds of weapons aimed at her. It was said that the Chinese shot first and asked questions later. She told herself she didn't have to be afraid. After all, she would be dead before the sound of the gunshot even reached her ears.

But the fatal shot did not come. Obviously, the soldiers had other things to worry about. Nobody seemed to even consider that somebody would be crazy enough to storm the hill.

When she was about halfway up, she stopped to catch her breath and turned around. In the east, the dawn was approaching. The dome of the Arkonide energy shield stretched up towards the sky, flawless and perfect. It was actually see-through, but the sun was still too low to light up the place where the *Stardust* had landed. Sue thought she could make out straight lines and square shapes. Could it be the outlines of the city of Terrania, whose founding Perry Rhodan had announced?

The ground surrounding the dome was teeming with people. The people looked like ants to Sue. Excited ants. They would die if she failed to complete what she had set out to do.

She continued running and managed to reach the peak unscathed. General Bai Jun had set up his tent here. It was large and splendid, and yet it seemed tiny compared to the huge Chinese flag flying above it.

Two guards were standing at its entrance. Sue avoided them and approached the tent from behind. One last sprint and she reached the side of the tent, grabbed the canvas, lifted it up at the edges and sneaked inside by crawling underneath.

It was dark inside. The general needed sleep. The air was stale and smelled of dried sweat. Sue stood up straight and let her eyes grow accustomed to the dark. She recognized the general's bed to the right of her and crept slowly towards it.

It was empty.

Where was...

Strong hands grabbed her from behind and held on to her tightly. Sue let out a scream that was a mixture of surprise and pain.

A deep voice said to her in English, “Who are you, girl? And what are you doing in my tent?”

“I... My name is Sue.” Her heart was beating so hard, she almost couldn't breathe. Caught! They had caught her! She swallowed and said in a voice that was as loud and steady as she could muster, “I want to speak to General Bai Jun!”

“Really? So why do you sneak into my tent like an assassin?”

The general! It was the general!

“My officers have orders,” the voice continued, “to listen to civilians. You could have brought your matter to them, and they would have informed me of it.”

Sue shook her head. “Not possible! We don’t have time!”

The general’s grasp was very tight. It seemed to Sue as if Bai Jun could tear her in two if he felt like it. One of his hands let go of her. He snapped his fingers and a dim light went on. He turned Sue around and lifted her up to eye level.

Bai Jun looked exactly like Sue imagined a Chinese general would look. However, his skin was darker than she had expected, and he was wearing a uniform, as if he had known that a visitor was coming in the middle of the night.

“A small American girl,” he said quietly. “What can a child have to say to me that is of importance?”

“I’m not a child!”

The General’s eyes fell on the stump of Sue’s arm. His eyes shone with pity. “I can see that,” he said quietly. “But it makes the situation easier if we treat you as a child, because then I can hand you over to the conventional military authorities, can’t I?”

“No!” Sue reared up. “You can’t do that! I want to help you!”

“You want to help me, little girl? And how do you intend to do that? It seems to me that you are the one who urgently needs help.”

“He’s a traitor!” Sue spat out. “Your adjutant is a traitor!”

His smile froze. “He Jian-Dong? What about him?” The general’s fingers dug deep into the flesh beneath her armpits.

Sue tried to ignore the pain. “The secret service has persuaded him to place nuclear warheads below the energy shield. They are going to be detonated in less than an hour!”

Bai Jun scrutinized her silently. “Nuclear warheads... How do you know that?”

Because John read his mind! Sue wanted to scream out. But that was impossible, and the General would never have believed her. She hissed stubbornly, “Because I just do!”

“You just know it, do you? Okay. Do you have proof? Where are the warheads?”

“In a tunnel!”

“In what tunnel? There are hundreds of them.”

“I... I don’t know.” Sue sensed that by admitting this, she had lost all chance of success. But lying would not have helped her either. She had no proof. But did she at least have something that would make the general listen to her, take her seriously?

A thought came into her mind. “Your army!” she called out.

“What about it?”

“The troops are withdrawing! Your adjutant gave the order to withdraw so that they will be in a safe place when the warheads go off!”

Bai Jun went rigid. His fatherly smile froze. He put her down on

the bed with a gentleness that surprised her and pulled a pod out of his bag. His fingers flew across the touchscreen, calling up the latest status reports. Then his pupils widened, and he looked at her.

“Do not move an inch, girl! Do you understand me?”

Sue nodded. The General lifted the pod to his ear and called his adjutant. A few minutes later, He Jian-Dong entered the tent and saluted. His uniform and his posture were as impeccable as they had been a few hours earlier out in the desert, but his domineering manner was gone. Bai Jun was in command here, and the adjutant was his servant.

“He Jian-Dong, do you know this girl?” the general asked in English. The adjutant looked closely at Sue with a cool, disparaging expression, as if he was deciding whether to buy a piece of furniture or not. “Not that I am aware of. Should I?”

“The girl says she knows you. She says you are a traitor.”

He Jian-Dong was unmoved. “These Rhodan followers are willing to do anything to gain an advantage,” he replied. “What does she want from you? Water? Food?”

“The girl maintains that you have positioned nuclear warheads in one of the tunnels below the energy shield.”

“That’s absurd. What does a child know about military affairs? And why should I betray you, General? I owe everything to you.”

“Yes, you do.” Bai Jun squeezed his eyes closed. “But I know you, He Jian-Dong. Your love of the Fatherland is more important to you than anything else, is it not? How, I ask myself, would you react if the secret service approached you and appealed to your patriotism? Could you resist? Or would you betray me?”

Was Sue mistaken, or had the adjutant wavered for a second, like a blade of grass that had been caught by a slight breeze?

“That is merely speculation, General.”

“Yes? Then why are a large number of our troops currently in

the process of withdrawing without me having issued any orders to that effect?"

"A temporary regrouping, General," He Jian-Dong answered without flinching. "The front troops are exhausted. The hot, dusty desert is getting to them. The days of heavy gunfire... Our soldiers need a break. We can still keep the siege going with fewer troops. I assumed that this arrangement was in line with your own wishes, General."

Bai Jun said nothing. His eyes wandered back and forth between the adjutant and Sue. He finally reached a decision.

"Take the girl, He Jian-Dong!"

"Yes, General. Should she be sentenced? She exposed you to danger."

"Danger?" A smile passed over the General's lips. "You should know me better by now. No, she should not be sentenced. Fill her water bottle and bring her back to the other maniacs in the desert. That is punishment enough."

Over. It was over. The General had rejected her story. He believed the adjutant, whom he had trusted for years, and not the crippled girl who had snuck into his tent in the middle of the night. But then, what had she expected? How could she have ever thought she could do something to change the situation?

It was over. The warheads were going to explode. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, were probably going to die. And the Arkonide energy shield might break. And then it would be over for Perry Rhodan. Over with the dream of Terrania. The dream of traveling to the stars.

"No!" Sue screamed. "He's lying, General! Can't you see that? He..."

The adjutant grabbed Sue. His grip was painful, an expression of the fury he felt at this child who had seen through him. Sue saw the rage in his eyes, and it scared her. It told her that she would never

make it to the foot of the hill alive if He Jian-Dong took her with him.

“Let me go!” Sue struggled and tried to bite the adjutant. He Jian-Dong had no trouble holding her still. “General! You must...”

All of a sudden there were sparks in the air, blinding Sue. A blast of hot air hit her like a gust of wind, burning her lungs. He Jian-Dong gasped and lifted his arm to protect his eyes. Sue managed to escape his grasp and jump to the side.

Two more men were now standing in the tent: Sid González and John Marshall.

“Stop!” John called. “Leave the girl alone!”

The general turned towards the unexpected intruders. It was a calm movement, as if he were turning to guests at a dinner party to begin a harmless chat about the weather.

“And why should I do that?” he asked.

“Because she’s telling the truth! There are warheads!”

“Oh yes? And why should I believe you, stranger?”

“Because...” John Marshall took a deep breath “Because I can read your adjutant’s mind. He Jian-Dong is a traitor!”

14.

The Past

The sound of thunder coming from a distance in the cloudless blue sky was the first sign.

Clifford Monterny and Ivanovich Goratchin waited at the edge of the landing field, relieved to hear the noise. Neither of them spoke. But it was not like in Iraq, when they were silent in solidarity with one another. This was an awkward silence. The entire camp was

waiting.

The children were all standing in the large square. Wearing new clothes, freshly showered, and each holding a small American flag made of paper. Julie, who had practised the day's procedures with them dozens of times, was with them.

An important, kind man would be visiting them, she had told the children. The man who made it possible for Camp Specter to exist. His name was Stanley Drummond.

That was one part of the truth. She had kept the other part to herself. The fact that Drummond would be deciding whether to continue the camp or not, and therefore deciding their fate.

The thunder got louder as two black dots appeared in the sky, growing larger as they approached. Two Air Force transport helicopters. They touched down at the edge of the landing area. Their hatches opened, releasing soldiers who quickly spread out.

A sound that reminded Monterny of the flapping of numerous wings announced the arrival of a third helicopter. A civilian machine appeared, surrounded by a swarm of unmanned drones, which spread out and circled the camp at different heights. Several of them landed in the camp.

The civilian helicopter landed and the engine came to a standstill. Once the sand thrown up by the turbulence of the rotors had settled, a man got out. He was wearing a suit, but the way he walked and his posture told Monterny that he was a veteran, that he too had once been a soldier.

Ivanhoe went to meet the man, while Monterny followed him, keeping two steps behind all the way.

"Minister Drummond, it's a great pleasure for me to welcome you to Camp Specter!"

"The pleasure is all mine."

"May I introduce my closest colleague, Clifford Monterny?" Goratchin gestured for him to approach. "Without his tireless

efforts, we would only have made half the progres we have already achieved."

The minister's handshake was firm. "Goratchin has told me a great deal about you," he said. "It's an honor to meet you."

"It... It's a great honor for me," Monterny stammered. He was not expecting to be anything more than a minor role in this meeting. A role he would have to break out of if he was to fulfil his promise to Julie.

They showed the Minister for Homeland Security around the camp. Drummond proved to be well informed and extremely interested in what went on there. Ivanhoe, who could barely conceal his nervousness, did not move from the minister's side. Monterny gathered all the courage he could, contributed to the conversation, constantly looking for an opportunity to speak to the minister out of earshot from Ivanhoe. But no opportunity presented itself.

The children sang for the minister. Drummond went to them, shook hands, and handed out praise, not least to Julie. Her mind was racing. She was about to speak to the minister in Ivanhoe's presence, but a warning look from Monterny held her back. *Leave it to me!*

The children gave a demonstration of their skills. Shanta Preston disappeared without disappearing. Ariane Colas stank in a way that only she could. Elmer Bradley stuck his hand into a piece of wood without injuring himself or damaging the wood. Tako Kakuta really did disappear, only to turn up again a few meters away.

Roster Deegan came next. The boy tried to hide his nervousness by acting overly relaxed, but he could not fool Monterny. Roster acted as if what other people thought didn't bother him, and yet it meant everything to him.

Julie led the children away from the area, and they positioned themselves on both sides. This left a long, straight space that was empty of people. A concrete construction element stood at one end. It didn't belong there and was originally intended to be part of an

exterior wall of one of the buildings. However, during construction work, it turned out to be superfluous and was ultimately left behind when the workers left the site.

Since then, it had been standing where they had left it. Now covered with many layers of paint, it had successfully survived the children's playful instincts.

Roster Deegan lifted his arms. The excited voices of his peers fell silent. Roster He turned his arms to the right. A new dark dot appeared in the sky, came towards them without making a sound, and stopped about one meter in front of Roster at eye level.

It was a steel ball. Almost as big as a football, it had been ordered by Ivanhoe specially for this day and brought to Camp Specter. The boy stretched his arms towards the sphere and slowly turned on his heels. The heavy ball followed his movements as if they were joined to one another by an invisible tape.

Roster bent forward, his hands glued to his sides. His powers were extraordinary, but they also cost him a great deal of energy. When the boy stood up again, the ball began to speed up and zoomed in a straight line towards the fence that surrounded the camp. It stopped just a hand's width before the wire mesh. Roster lifted his hands once again and let out a bloodcurdling scream.

The steel ball shot off as if it had been fired from a gun. Monterny could only register a blur as it passed by where he was standing. Then they heard a deafening bang, and a cloud of dust and smoke surrounded the concrete element. Once it had settled, the hole that the metal ball had left became visible. It had gone all the way through.

Roster balled up his hand and took a bow. The boy used a mixture of gestures he had seen on the Internet from goalkeepers and magicians. An awestruck silence hung in the air for a second before the children burst into applause—applause that was a little too frantic for Monterny's taste. Many of the children were afraid of the aggressive boy. And having now witnessed this proof of the power of his telekinetic abilities, they sought refuge in their clapping.

Minister Drummond, who knew nothing about the dynamics in the community at Camp Specter, did not notice. He turned to Ivanhoe.

“Goratchin, that is impressive. Can I speak with the boy?”

“Of course!”

Ivanhoe gestured for Roster Deegan to come over. Roster came reluctantly. He had learned that it was generally better for him to avoid the company of adults.

Drummond shook his hand. “Congratulations, young man! That was extraordinary. Our country needs people like you!”

Roster opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He was not used to praise.

Drummond turned back to Ivanhoe. “Good work, Goratchin. When can we expect further results?”

He was interrupted by a buzzing sound. Drummond reached into his pocket, took out his pod, and read the message that had just arrived. Then he put the pod back in his pocket. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I must cut my visit short.”

Drummond nodded to the bodyguards. They gathered around the minister and escorted him to his helicopter.

No! Monterny looked on in disbelief as the minister got into the helicopter and the machine took off, disappearing into the ensuing dusk. Camp Specter lay there in the waning light as if the minister’s visit had never taken place.

No! I promised Julie!

Ivanhoe draped an arm around his shoulder, pressing tightly the way he used to when they were still friends. “Clifford,” he whispered, “we did it. We convinced him!”

“Y... Yes”, Monterny stuttered. “That’s fantastic.”

He felt sick. He had not managed to do what he'd wanted to. He had failed to tell the minister what his old comrade did to the children in the camp. He had broken his promise to Julie. When Ivanhoe let go of him to go and congratulate Roster Deegan, Monterny left. He ran and locked himself in his room.

It was a pathetic attempt to get away. And it failed.

"Clifford, open up!" Julie was hammering on his door. "Please!"

Monterny opened the door. He knew Julie would not give up.

"The minister cut off his visit!" she said happily. She obviously believed that the revelations about Goratchin had led to the minister leaving.

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Her eyes widened. "How can that be? He can't just disappear without saying a word after what he found out..."

"He doesn't know anything. I didn't tell him."

"But... But you promised me!"

"Yes."

"So why didn't you do it?"

He looked up and tried to hold her intense gaze. "It wasn't possible. Ivanhoe didn't move a milliliter from the minister's side the whole time."

"And? Goratchin is no longer the man he once was. You say that yourself! You should have just ignored him and said something anyway!"

"I know, but...I just couldn't. *Please,* Julie, try to understand me!"

Monterny emphasized what he was saying using the full power of his ability.

Julie wavered as if she had been hit by a strong gust of wind. Tears welled up in her eyes. She no longer looked at him, but stared into the distance.

“How could I be so stupid?” she whispered. “You have two sides to you, Clifford Monterny. I would never have...”

She was interrupted by the loud rattling sound of machine gunfire.

They ran outside.

Night had fallen. A second round of gunfire was aimed at the fence. A cone of light from a searchlight lit up the area right beside it.

Two children were standing in the glaring light. They were holding hands. It was Sid González and Elmer Bradley, trying to escape.

The two boys did not move and seemed to have given up. Monterny knew better. They were literally on their way out. Sid and Elmer had joined forces mentally. Sid hoped that by combining their powers, he would manage to teleport them away from there. A jump in which he would take Elmer with him.

“No!” Monterny yelled. On the other side of the camp fence, there was nothing but dusty dry wilderness and drug lords. The boys wouldn’t last a week. “Don’t do it!”

He started into a sprint. Julie could not keep up and fell behind. But somebody else was faster. It was Ivanhoe.

“Stop shooting!” he roared. “Don’t shoot!”

Ivanhoe ran from the right into the ball of light, took a jump and knocked Elmer Bradley over. He and the boy rolled together like a huge ball and came to a halt on the ground at the outer edges of the

light.

Monterny got there a second later. He jumped at Sid, throwing him to the floor. Sid let out a tormented cry, got up again, and tried to scratch and bite Monterny.

Monterny used his entire weight to keep Sid down, but the boy was much stronger than he'd realized. His nails dug into Monterny's lower arm, leaving bloody scratches on the skin.

Monterny held on tight. He had to prevent Sid from teleporting. As long as he maintained physical contact, Sid would have to jump with him and that would cost him much more energy than he would require for his own escape.

So all he had to do was hold on tight and wait until the boy had expended all his energy.

A loud scream filled with pain came from one side and then ended with a gurgling sound. Monterny span round. Ivanhoe and Elmer had collapsed together.

"Ivanhoe! What's wrong?"

There was no answer. Monterny let go of Sid and ran over to where the two were lying on the ground. Blood was flowing out of Ivanhoe's chest like water from a well. Elmer's left arm was sticking out. Monterny could only see the top of his shoulder, as the rest of the arm was covered by Ivanhoe's shirt.

The boy was lifeless.

A knife? Impossible. Elmer, a quiet boy, couldn't hurt a fly.

Monterny grabbed Elmer's shoulder in an attempt to pull his arm out of the shirt. But he couldn't. The arm must have been jammed. Monterny tore Ivanhoe's shirt apart but didn't get any further. He did not want to believe what his eyes were showing him: Elmer's arm was rammed right up to the shoulder *in* Ivanhoe's chest!

Sparks flew, bathing Ivanhoe in a light that was much brighter than that of the searchlight. A moment later, a wave of hot air

brushed past Monterny. Sid González had used the opportunity to teleport away from the scene.

Monterny was only aware of it at the edges of his consciousness. *Ivanhoe!* Ivanhoe was dying!

His old comrade jolted, and his head came up. He opened his eyes as if he had just woken from a dream. He stared at Monterny. “Clifford, I... I’m so... Ivan... Please... ”

The Russian reared up as if every muscle in his body had stiffened, tensed. Then the moment passed and he collapsed back onto the ground.

Ivanovich Goratchin was dying.

And Camp Specter followed him into death as his powers were unleashed in that final tensing of his muscles.

The kitchen was the first building to go up in a tongue of flame, like a huge match that had just been struck against the side of a matchbox.

Jack, the cook, ran out. He too was in flames.

“Clifford, what’s going on?” Julie screamed. She had fallen to her knees beside him, holding her hands in front of her face to shield herself from the immense heat. She could not know what was happening, as she knew nothing about Ivanhoe’s abilities. There was so much she didn’t know about Ivanhoe.

The school was next, then the boys’ dormitory, and after that the girls’. It was as if an invisible person were wandering through the camp with a flamethrower, working his way forward from building to building in the direction of the assembly hall.

“No!” Julie screamed and ran in the direction the flames were going.

Monterny let go of his dying comrade and followed her. There was nothing more he could do for Ivanhoe. But this time, Julie was faster. Her fear for the children gave her unforeseen strength and

speed. The orphans were in the assembly hall, celebrating the end of an exciting day. She had to get them out before...

The invisible hand was faster.

A huge tongue of flame shot out of the building. But it was smaller than the previous ones and only affected the left-hand side of the building. The powers of the dying man were weakening.

Julie ran without hesitation into the burning hall. Black smoke rose into the sky as the flames ate their way along the wooden walls.

The double doors were flung open, and the first children flowed out of the burning building with Roster Deegan right at the front. Monterny held onto the boy when he tried to run past him. He got down on one knee so that they were at eye-level and grabbed him by the shoulders.

“Don’t run away! I need you! You must hold up the roof! *Please!*”

Roster nodded slowly, as if in a trance. He was shaking with fear.

Monterny let him go and ran to the door. Part of the assembly hall walls collapsed and the roof started to cave in...and then it held. Roster was concentrating his telekinetic powers on it, an object that was multiple times heavier than the heavy steel ball he had moved around a few hours ago.

The hall was filled with acrid smoke. Monterny held his breath, but the smoke burned his eyes. Tears made it difficult for him to see clearly. There were children lying around all over the floor, not moving. Monterny paid no attention to them. He was looking for Julie.

She was lying at the far end of the hall in front of the emergency exit, which she had tried to open in vain. The door had jammed, its metal frame twisted by the heat.

Monterny picked Julie up and ran outside with her. He had barely left the hall when Roster Deegan collapsed. A moment later, the burning roof, no longer kept up by his invisible support, caved

in.

Monterny laid Julie down. She wasn't breathing. He put his hand on her breast, placed his other hand on top of it, and began to press down rhythmically. He hardly noticed the rescued children who had formed a circle around the two of them.

He kept pressing. Thirty times. He placed his lips on Julie's and gave her the air he breathed. Her own lips were lifeless. He pressed again. Thirty times. Her lips were cold. He pressed harder. A loud crack told him that several ribs had broken. Julie's body jolted upwards, and Monterny experienced a sudden feeling of hope.

But it disappeared as soon as it had come. Her lips remained cold. He pressed until his arms cramped up. At last, he fell down beside Julie, gasping for air.

She was dead.

Ivanhoe was dead.

Elmer Bradley and a dozen more children were dead.

Camp Specter was in flames.

Why? he asked himself. *Why?* Julie had only ever wanted the best, Ivanhoe had only wanted the best, and he too had only wanted the best. What had they done to deserve this? How could...

And then a realization struck him like lightning. Somebody was to blame. And that somebody was Sid González.

If the boy had not tried to escape, Julie would still be alive. And Ivanhoe. And Elmer and all the other children. Camp Specter would not have ended in a funeral pyre if it hadn't been for Sid González.

The fires gradually died down, giving way to the darkness of the moonless night. Somewhere out there, Sid González was hiding. The murderer.

Monterny comforted the crying children and waited until morning. He would find Sid, no matter what it cost him.

15.

July 11, 2036

He Jian-Dong quickly regained his composure. He pulled his pistol out of his belt and aimed it at the strange intruders.

John Marshall read the adjutant's thoughts a second before the adjutant could act on them.

"Sid!" he yelled.

The boy understood immediately. A shower of sparks filled the air, and Marshall took a dive to the side. The bullet that was supposed to hit him penetrated the wall of the tent, bounced off a stone outside, and ricocheted wildly with a high-pitched noise.

The adjutant did not manage to take a second shot. Sid materialized above He Jian-Dong and fell onto him with his entire weight. The adjutant screamed and dropped to the floor. Sid held on tight to him, pressing him down, but He Jian-Dong refused to give up. He reared up, trying to cock his pistol again and fire it at Sid.

Sue prevented that from happening. She dove towards them, using her entire body weight to push away the hand holding the weapon. Marshall was right behind her, and he managed to wrestle the gun out of He Jian-Dong's grip. The adjutant let out a roar and twisted around one more time, but he was unable to shake Sid off. Panting, his eyes closed, he remained lying on the ground.

General Bai Jun had watched the fight carefully without intervening.

"Who are you?" he asked, turning to the man who had appeared in his tent out of nowhere.

"I'm John Marshall." The telepath stood up and bowed very slightly. "And your adjutant was overcome by my friend Sid

González. Please excuse the fact that we didn't introduce ourselves. The circumstances required immediate action."

"I see that," the general replied drily. "You and your friends can do some astounding tricks, Marshall. How do you manage that?"

"With this." Marshall laid his hand on his forehead. "We can provide more explanations later. For the moment, suffice it to say we might be people with extraordinary skills, but we have very ordinary ambitions. We want only the best, just as you do, General. Please trust us."

"That's a lot to ask ..."

Marshall, who was following the general's thoughts, knew that Bai Jun was inclined to believe them. His adjutant's betrayal was only a mild surprise to him. All that he needed was a last gentle push to cast aside any doubts he may have had and shake off the shackles of his past—and to be bold enough to choose a new existence.

One gentle push...

The telepath looked at the pistol. He went to the general and held out the weapon to him. Its muzzle was pointing at Marshall himself. "Is that enough proof for the moment that we have come with the best of intentions, General?"

"Yes, I think so." Bai Jun took the weapon, secured it, and stuck it into his belt.

Sue jumped up. "We have to hurry! The warheads are set to detonate in twenty minutes. We have to find them!"

The general nodded. He went over to the adjutant, who was still being held down on the floor by Sid, and said something to him in Chinese. To Marshall's surprise, his tone of voice sounded neither angry nor threatening, but more sad than anything else. The telepath tuned in to Bai Jun's thoughts and realized that this estimation was correct. The general loved the adjutant like a son, despite his betrayal.

He Jian-Dong answered reluctantly before closing his eyes, turning his head away and falling silent.

Bai Jun stood up. “Did you read his thoughts, Marshall?”

The general was just as astute as he was flexible. Less than five minutes had passed since he had heard of Marshall’s ability to read minds. If he had ever thought about the existence of such abilities before, then as esoteric madness...and now he had accepted it as fact, using it as naturally as he used his pod.

Marshall nodded. “I can see the caves. The timer on the detonator is running. Like he said.”

“Can the detonator be stopped?”

“I think so. The female agent hired by He Jian-Dong showed him how the timer can be halted.”

“Did you find that in his thoughts?”

“893381,” Marshall answered.

“Good. Then let your sparks fly and go to the warheads just like you did when you entered my tent and halt the timer!”

“I wish that was possible. But when I see the cave in my mind’s eye in every little detail...it still looks like any other cave. I can’t give Sid a description that would be good enough to take him there. You know, General”, Marshall said jokingly, “I can only read minds. Sid is the one who can leap.”

“So your powers can help you no longer?”

Sid interrupted. “No. That was only the beginning!”

Without saying another word, the boy disappeared in a shower of sparks. He Jian-Dong, freed from the weight of Sid’s body, moved slightly but remained lying where he was. The adjutant’s will had been broken.

Sid returned a few seconds later in another shower of sparks. He

was not alone. “May I introduce my friends, General?” he said, following Marshall’s example. “Anne Sloane and Wuriu Sengu. They also have special powers—different ones than John and I have.”

Sid stretched his hands out and Marshall took the left one. Anne took the boy’s right hand, while she held Wuriu’s hand with the other. They stood in a semi-circle in front of the adjutant lying on the floor. He Jian-Dong’s eyes opened wide as he sighed deeply and tried to crawl away from them.

“Don’t be afraid,” Marshall said quietly. “We’re not going to hurt you.”

Did he believe the telepath? Was it one last attempt at protest? Whatever it was, the adjutant remained lying down.

Marshall closed his eyes and concentrated. They had to join forces mentally to form a single unit. The telepath sank into himself and delved into the minds of his comrades. He blocked out the thoughts of tens of thousands of others as blackness settled over his mind. This blackness was like a blank board to him, just waiting for him to draw on it with chalk.

But no images came. John Marshall sweated. Waves of heat rushed over him, and he felt as if a clamp had been attached to his head and it was becoming tighter and tighter. He...

A touch brought him back into the present. He opened his eyes. It was Sue. They had forgotten the girl. And yet she too had a special gift. He squeezed her hand tightly and closed his eyes again. A chill came over him as the sweat started to have a cooling effect.

Blackness. Indescribable darkness.

And then, painfully slowly, images started to appear. Fragments from He Jian-Dong’s thoughts.

He found himself in a casino. He was holding a note in his hand. An American rocket had landed in the Gobi, a trivial matter compared to the upcoming reclamation of Taiwan. And yet why did he hesitate to bring the note to the general? Where did this feeling come from that

nothing would ever be the same again if he delivered this note? Where did the knots on his stomach come from?

The desert. Dusty and bone-dry. A group of insane people under a dome that looked like glass but was made of energy. Why was the general so reluctant? Taiwan was just waiting to be reclaimed!

The crazy ones. There were more and more and more of them. They came from everywhere in the world. They seemed to be drawn from a reservoir that would never run out. They stank, they were rude, they were constantly beating each other up. They highlighted what people were like. People needed leadership, a strong hand to save them from themselves...

The female agent who visited him secretly, who had special orders for him. Finally, the leaders had taken notice of him! He directed the soldiers, had the warheads unloaded...

In the tunnel. Alone. He bent over the touchscreen and hesitated. Was Bai Jun not like a father to him? A strict father, yes, but one who loved him? But at some point in life, the time came to follow one's own path. He activated the timer on the detonator...

"The tunnel! I know which one!" Wuriu Sengu yelled, and at that same moment, all the mutants, who had joined together as one, saw the cave with the detonators.

They released their minds from one another. Marshall suddenly found himself back in the real world. It seemed pale and dull compared to the intensity of his perceptions that came from being in union with the others. He stumbled, and he had to hold on to Sid and Sue for support.

"Can you go on?" the boy asked.

"Yes...of course!" Marshall said and wanted to add "What about you?" but didn't have enough strength left.

"Then let's go!" Sid squeezed his hand even tighter and sparks flew...

A moment later, a sharp stone was pressing into Marshall's foot

,and he could smell damp mold. They were in the tunnel.

The warheads were ten yards in front of them. Four in number, massive steel cylinders, pointed at one end. They were on a transportation stand.

“Hey, what’s that?” Sid called out. “Atomic bombs don’t look like that!”

“It’s them. They’ve been camouflaged. The soldiers who brought them here thought they were conventional artillery ammunition. ”

They ran to the warheads. A touchscreen had been attached to the transportation stand. Sid touched it, and a menu lit up. It was inconspicuous and could have easily belonged to an elevator or a refrigerator. Two times could be seen at the bottom edge: the local time and the time left until detonation: six minutes and forty-eight seconds. Marshall touched the screen, and Chinese letters appeared.

“Damn, no!” Sid spat out. “Did you see in his thoughts how to stop the detonator?”

“I hope so.”

Marshall worked his way through the menu. He made very slow progress, making typing errors again and again, having to repeat steps. The telepath was nervous. He was not familiar with the writing, and the images from He Jian-Dong’s thoughts were not very clear. The adjutant had only seen the control panel once himself when he and some soldiers had brought the warheads into the tunnel. His other memories came from the instructions the female agent had given to him verbally. They were blurred, and Marshall couldn’t quite grasp them. It felt as if his thoughts were shrouded in fog. He saw and felt them, but he just couldn’t fully process them.

When the display reached four minutes and seventeen seconds, the time had come. The control unit’s computer asked for the code in familiar Arabic numbers. Marshall entered 8-9-3-3-8-1. He forced himself to type them in slowly. There was a row of placeholder characters on the touchscreen.

He confirmed his entry. The menu flickered for a second and then the timer continued.

Marshall did something he never did: he cursed out loud and with all his heart.

“What’s wrong?” Sid asked.

“I must have typed in the wrong numbers. I’ll try again.”

He entered the code, number for number. The menu flickered. The timer display jumped to two minutes and fifty-eight seconds.

“Damn! For crying out loud...”

Sid grabbed him. “It’s not working! We have to get out of here!”

Marshall pulled his arm out of Sid’s grasp. “Just one more attempt!”

He typed in the numbers, and this time the menu did not flicker. It became gray, and a symbol appeared that he had not seen in He Jian-Dong’s thoughts.

Sid gasped. “John, what’s going on? Why is it not working?”

Had he read the adjutant’s thoughts wrongly? Or had he just typed in the number incorrectly for the third time? Or... Or had somebody lied to He Jian-Dong, and there was no way to stop the detonation? Yes, that must have been the explanation, Marshall realized. What interest would the Chinese leadership have in giving a simple adjutant the chance to spoil their plans? He Jian-Dong was only a tool to them.

“They lied to him,” he said out loud. “The detonation can’t be stopped.”

“They... They... But that can’t be...” Sid didn’t finish the sentence. His eyes widened as he understood, and then he did what he always did when the pressure became too much: he teleported.

Marshall found himself back in the general’s tent.

Sue screamed and jumped into his arms. “Thank God you’re back! Did you stop the detonation?”

He shook his head. “No. It’s not possible. The secret service lied to the adjutant.”

Sue froze. “But that’s... They...”

The general ended the sentence for her. “That’s how our government works. I was afraid that would happen.” His voice sounded as if he were reading from a piece of paper. As an officer, he knew what the explosion of an atomic bomb meant.

There was an awkward silence. Sue let go of Marshall and turned on her heels. “What now? What do we do now?”

Marshall looked at the clock. They didn’t even have two minutes left. “There’s nothing more we can do. There’s only one thing for it.”

“What?”

“Run. Nobody benefits if we die here. Sid can leap with us. Hopefully far away enough.” He turned to the boy. “Can you manage that, Sid?”

The boy was sitting, sunken. His shirt and trousers hung on him like wet rags, dripping with sweat. They were far too big for him. That was impossible. Sid had picked out what he was wearing only two days ago before they left Owey Island. They had fit him perfectly at the time.

Now they hung loose on him. He had jumped and jumped and jumped, fear removing all of his inner reservations. His powers were strong, boundlessly strong, it seemed. But his body could not cope. The leaps had drained him, gradually burning his body away.

The Sid who had left to come to the Gobi had been slim and wiry. The Sid who was now standing before Marshall was emaciated, seemingly made of nothing but skin and bones. Sid had nothing left to give.

“Sid?” Marshall repeated when the boy didn’t answer. “Do you think you can get us away from here?”

Sid looked up at him. His eyes were deep in their sockets, his cheeks sunken. “No.”

Marshall swallowed. It was a death sentence. “Then at least rescue yourself. And Sue. You can manage that, can’t you?”

“No.” The teen shook his head. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t make sense if you and Sue die with us!” Marshall argued. “You need to—”

“I’m not planning on dying.” Sid tensed up. “I’ll be right back, John.”

Sparks flew everywhere as Sid González disappeared.

16.

July 11, 2036

"Crest da Zoltral?"

Two men were standing in the doorway. They were big and strong, and they were wearing suits, not uniforms like Clifford Monterny's men. They had wrapped strange-looking strips of cloth around their necks that humans called "ties". That puzzled Crest. For reasons that he could not understand, wearing this strip of cloth seemed to signalize to other humans that these people could be trusted.

"Who did you think? The Emperor of China?" The cheek in this reply was supposed to hide the fact that he was scared.

"May we ask you to accompany us."

"Where to?"

"We are not authorized to give you that information," the man answered stiffly.

"Who are you?"

"We are not authorized to give you that information." The man, whose unkempt curly black hair did not fit his stiff manner, surveyed the room with his eyes. "May I ask you in the interest of all of us to cooperate."

Go with them! a voice in Crest said. It was quiet. It did not belong to him and yet it had become a part of him.

"I had nothing else planned." Crest placed the bookmark inside the book on his lap—a book on marriage guidance that fascinated and horrified the Arkonide in equal measure—closed it, and put it on his bedside table. Then he got up to walk over to the door.

"You'd better take your jacket with you," the man said. "It could

get cool."

Crest hesitated. "Why? It's a hot summer day, is it not?"

"Yes. But you should still take your jacket."

"If you think so..." Crest went to the wardrobe, took his jacket from its hanger, and put it on. His hands were shaking. They were taking him away!

When he turned back to the two men again, the silent one was holding a metal object in his hands. Two rings joined by a short chain.

"What's that?" Crest asked.

"Handcuffs. An unavoidable necessity. Please understand that we have to do this."

The Arkonide stared at the rings. He did not understand. Were these handcuffs a form of jewellery? Or part of a ritual?

The man with the curls nodded at the silent one, who approached Crest and, with a deft movement, placed the metal rings around the Arkonide's wrists. The closing parts clicked shut.

Crest da Zoltral was bound. Defenseless.

No, you're not, the voice whispered to him. Crest did not listen to it. He had listened to it when he set out for Earth with Perry Rhodan. It had saved his life. But that did not mean the voice was always right.

"Wh... What are you doing there?" His pulse was racing.

"There is no need to be worried. It's an unavoidable necessity, nothing more."

"But you have taken me pris—"

Crest did not manage to finish the sentence. The silent man pulled a small sack made of black cloth out of his pocket and pulled

it over the Arkonide's head

"What are you doing with me?" Crest asked. The sack closed out the light, immersing him in darkness.

"Remain calm. Cooperate and you have nothing to fear."

Stay calm! the voice whispered to him, as if it had joined forces with these humans.

"You're not allowed to do this!" Crest yelled. He did not know whether the men could understand what he was saying. The fabric was heavy and tight around the Arkonide's mouth and nose. "Where is Monterny? I want to speak to Clifford Monterny immediately!"

He received no answer. Hands grabbed him by the shoulders and held him tight. The two men brought him outside, where the sun burned on the black sack. The air smelled of resin, a smell that Crest had come to appreciate over the last few days. It soon mixed with the smell of hot asphalt.

"Be careful: stairs!" the Arkonide heard. He lifted his leg and felt the metal grid of a stairway beneath the soles of his shoes. He counted thirteen stairs, and then they walked a few steps on an even surface.

"Watch out! A high step!" the man said. A moment later, Crest was lifted, pushed into a seat, and fastened with belts.

"What are you doing with me? Where am I?"

An engine started. A human engine, jolting noisily as it moved. The seat and the ground beneath Crest's feet shuddered. He was in a helicopter! They were flying him out!

That's good, the voice whispered. *You can't stay with Monterny.*

"No! I don't want to go!" he called out. He *wanted* to stay with Monterny. He knew Monterny. Monterny was a man you could talk to. Crest flailed about with his handcuffed arms. But other arms grabbed the handcuffs and pulled his arms down effortlessly.

“Stay calm!” the man said. “You’ll hurt yourself. You have nothing to be afraid of!”

Crest did not believe the man. Humans were capable of anything. He had studied them in the weeks after the *Aetron* was stranded on the moon. And since meeting Perry Rhodan and arriving here on Earth, he had had his own personal experiences with them. And he had been reading about their society, their history and a great deal more.

Among other things, he had read about the brutal systems of power that most of their so-called nations were subjected to. Governments made people they disapproved of disappear. Crest found out to his disgust that, on Earth, people disliked by the powers that be were even sometimes thrown out of airplanes and helicopters.

And what was he, if not somebody who was disliked by the powers that be? His mere existence questioned everything that human societies were founded on. He was living proof that human beings were by no means the pinnacle of creation. So what was more logical than getting rid of him? If Crest, the last of the Arkonides, was gone, then the world of the humans could go back to normal again...

No, you are too valuable, the voice whispered.

Crest did not listen to what the voice had to say. His pulse was hammering. The tight cloth around his face made breathing difficult, and he felt like his head was going to burst. He coughed, and a new form of darkness that came from within replaced the darkness caused by the hood over his head and he...

Suddenly, things became light again, blindingly so. The silent man of the two had pulled the hood from his head.

“Is everything okay?” the one with the curls asked.

Crest gasped for air. “Wh... Where are you taking me?” instead of answering the ridiculous question.

“We are not authorized to give you that information.”

“You want to kill me!”

“No. No harm will be done to you. We are civilized. We adhere to justice and the letter of the law.”

The man let go of him again, and Crest sank down behind the safety belt. He looked around. The doors and part of the floor of the helicopter were made of see-through material, giving him an unhindered view. He saw the sides of some mountains covered with dark forest but with occasional pale rock faces jutting out in between. In the valleys, rivers wound their way through bright green meadows. In front of the helicopter, in the direction they were flying, the mountains gradually made way for flatter ground that was inhabited by people.

Houses, either standing alone or in small groups, were strewn across the land. The broad ribbon of a highway ran through the area. There were vehicles on it driving at the moderate speed that humans considered to be fast.

After that, a long asphalt surface came into view. It was completely empty except for one single airplane. A small airport. The helicopter started descending towards the landing field. It flew around the grounds once as if the pilot wanted to make sure that everything was as it should be. And then the helicopter touched down not far from the airplane.

“We are changing transport,” the man with the curls said.

The silent one helped Crest out of the helicopter. The Arkonide swayed and would have fallen if the two men accompanying him had not held him up. Haggard and Manoli had cured his illness, but he was still an old man.

The Arkonide could hear a familiar loud thrumming noise coming closer. A second helicopter. Its arrival did not seem to be part of their plans. The two men became nervous, and the silent one reached into his suit where Crest thought he recognized the bulge of a weapon.

The helicopter landed, and a man got out alone. He was wiry, wore a uniform, and the left half of his face was covered in scars. Clifford Monterny, Crest's tormentor.

The Arkonide felt a sense of relief.

No, he's dangerous! The voice whispered loudly this time, as if it was afraid of this person. Yet Monterny could know nothing of its existence. And anyway, the voice knew no fear. *I was not born,* it had once whispered to him, *so I cannot die.*

Monterny smiled. "Gentlemen, how happy I am to see you here! I was told that our esteemed guest left in a hurry."

"What do you want, Monterny?" The man with the curls stiffened, his demeanour suddenly defiant. He also feared Clifford Monterny and realized that he would not be able to stand up to the latter.

"To say goodbye to Crest, of course, Agent Pollard. What did you think?"

The man flinched. "How do you know my name?"

"Oh, who wouldn't know it?" Monterny murmured. "Who doesn't know the Agents Pollard and Strummer, the top specialists from the Ministry of Homeland Security for discreet transportations?" He turned to the silent one. "How is your wife doing, Agent Strummer? I heard there were complications with the birth of your daughter? I hope that mother and child did not suffer any permanent damage."

The silent man gasped. The hand he had used to reach into his jacket balled into a fist.

Agent Pollard said in a harsh tone, "Do what you came to do, Monterny!"

"That's exactly what I am doing." Monterny focused his penetrating stare on Crest. The voice in Crest gasped in fear. "I very much regret that you can no longer be my guest, Crest da Zoltral. You were the most interesting conversationalist I have met in a long

time."

"Get on with saying your goodbyes!"

"Agent Pollard, *please*! Crest is a one-of-a-kind guest. Don't you understand that it's very hard for me to say goodbye?"

"Yes, but..."

"But perhaps it won't be necessary, at least not yet. Do you understand?"

"Y... Yes ..." Beads of sweat appeared on the agent's forehead. He was only able to answer with difficulty, as if Monterny's will exuded a power he could not resist.

"I'm pleased about that. You are an intelligent man, Agent Pollard. Someone who prefers intelligent solutions, am I right?"

"Y... Yes."

"Excellent. Perhaps we can find a compromise that both of us can live with." Monterny stepped up close to the man. "*Please,* help me! I—"

"No!" Agent Strummer yelled. He had pulled his weapon and aimed it at Monterny. A primitive projectile weapon, but Crest knew it was enough to kill humans. "Go, Monterny!"

Monterny was not fazed in the slightest. He scrutinized the man who was threatening him with the look of a scientist who was conducting an experiment, interested to see how it would turn out. The muzzle of the gun was shaking.

"Do you even know what you're doing?" Monterny asked. "The president personally—"

"The President personally warned us about you! We have orders to bring Crest da Zoltral to him. With the use of force, if necessary. Do you understand Monterny?"

Crest saw several men exiting the airplane behind Monterny's

back. They also held projectile weapons in their hands. Monterny noticed the movement in the Arkonide's eyes and turned around...and realized that he was on the losing side of this particular battle.

He closed his eyes and nodded slowly. "I see that I will not be able to achieve anything here today with good words and pleas." He turned back to Crest. "This is not what I wanted, Crest da Zoltral. But even I have my limits. I wish you the best of luck!"

Clifford Monterny turned away without looking at the agents and went back to the helicopter. Its engine started. Crest followed its flight until it was nothing more than a dark speck on the horizon.

He wanted nothing more than to be at his tormentor's side.

The voice in him said nothing.

The airplane took off. Crest soon became accustomed to the vibrations of the fuselage and the annoyingly loud roar of the engines.

The Arkonide looked out of the window. The humans had forgotten to put the black hood back over his head this time, perhaps because they were worried about their valuable prisoner. But Crest was certain it had more to do with their confrontation with Monterny, which had apparently shaken the two agents.

The landscape was ugly, marked by humans and their primitive technology. Countless roads cut through the Earth, and random groups of buildings ate their way into the countryside. He was filled with nostalgia and longing for his home and its sublime elegance. He would never see it again.

"Are you hungry?" Agent Pollard came towards him holding a tray with human food on it. Crest had first tasted it while being held captive by Monterny. Before that, he had kept to the Arkonide diet. To his surprise, the human food not only tasted good to him, he was also able to digest it without any problems.

“No, thank you,” he lied. Since his recovery, he had been permanently hungry, but he didn’t want to take anything from these people.

“As you wish. I’ll leave the tray there just in case you change your mind.” The human folded down a small, shaky table from the back of his seat that was located diagonally across from Crest’s and placed the tray with the food on it. Then he quickly moved away. Agent Pollard had lost his self-confidence. It was as if Monterny had shaken him to his core.

The ugly buildings of the humans became like a carpet that choked the landscape, and then finally the airplane got ready to land. Agent Pollard cleared away the untouched tray of food while Agent Drummer checked the safety belt that bound Crest to his seat.

“I have to put the hood on again,” the human said and pulled the black sack out of his pocket. “Please cooperate. It’s only for a few minutes.”

Darkness descended over Crest. After only a few breaths, the air he took in was already hot and sticky.

Why these undignified cruelties? “This is not what I wanted,” Monterny had said. What were the humans planning to do with him?

The decision is coming, the voice whispered. *It’s good this way.*

When Crest stepped onto the ground, the heat was oppressive. He could smell tar and asphalt. The Arkonide was pushed down into an upholstered seat. Coolness. The smell of plastic, cured animal skin, and sweat. The hum of an electric motor. He was in a car. It moved off. Every time they hit a curve, Crest, who couldn’t hold on anywhere, was thrown against the shoulders of the agents who were sitting to the right and left of him.

After what he guessed had been less than half an hour, the journey was over. To his surprise, the air was not hot as they got out of the car. It was cool, as if they had entered a cave. It stank of oil and rubber.

He was taken a few steps forward. They waited and then there was a ringing sound. The agents took him another three steps forward before stopping. The ground beneath Crest's feet moved upwards.

Now he was in an elevator. A primitive cabin lift. A second ringing sound told him the ride was over. The agents led him out of the lift and took the hood from his head.

He found himself in a large, open, chaotic space. It was actually a hall. The ceiling was high, and he could only see bits of it behind a maze of struts and spotlights. There were people everywhere, dashing hectically to and fro or bending, concentrated, over devices, the purpose of which Crest could only guess at.

Amid the hustle and bustle there was one island of calm. It looked like a kind of stage and all the spotlights were pointing towards it. A man was standing in the middle of it at a lectern. Crest da Zoltral recognized him immediately.

Stanley Drummond, President of the United States of America.

When the Arkonide was studying the humans while on board the *Aetron*, which had crashed on the moon, he had encountered Drummond again and again. The United States considered itself to be the most powerful of Earth's nations, and their president considered himself to be the most powerful man on Earth.

An estimation that happened to be true, Perry Rhodan had confirmed to him in one of their long conversations. The United States was by far the planet's largest military power. Stanley Drummond *was* the most powerful man on Earth.

The Arkonide was relieved. So that was the explanation! Humanity's leader wanted to meet him, the mysterious stranger, representative of a superior civilization. Why had that not occurred to him right away?

The voice within was silent. Was that a reprimand? A mood? It often said nothing for days on end. Crest had once believed that with the voice, he had gained a new companion who would never

let him down. But he was mistaken, just as he had been in so many other things.

President Drummond was practising a speech. Crest couldn't understand what he was saying because Drummond was speaking quietly and there was a lot of hustle and bustle in the room. A woman approached the President, laid a hand on his lower arm, and whispered something to him. He nodded, cleared his throat, and finished off the train of thought he was unfolding in his speech.

Then he came towards Crest. The Arkonide stiffened and tried to think of a suitable greeting in his head. He must not act like a prisoner, but he also must avoid coming across as arrogant. Getting the right balance was vital.

The president stopped two steps in front of him and scrutinized Crest without saying a word. The Arkonide could detect disgust in his eyes.

"I had imagined my first encounter with an alien to be a little different." Drummond shook his head with an air of reprimand. He made no move to offer Crest his hand, a gesture that was usual among humans. "It is a shame that it had to come to this."

Before Crest could respond, Drummond gave the agents orders. "Bring him over!" He once again glanced at Crest. "I hope you know how to maintain your composure."

Without waiting for an answer, the president returned to the speaker's lectern. Two people were busy setting up two American flags behind him. Others were bringing in a platform made of dark wood and a chair.

"You heard what the president said!"

The agents led Crest into the spotlight. It was extremely bright and painful. An after-effect of his illness, Dr. Haggard had said. It would pass. Crest wished that Dr. Haggard was with him. Or Dr. Eric Manoli. Or Perry Rhodan. Yes, Perry Rhodan, who had rescued him. But the mere thought was absurd. Rhodan was trapped in the Gobi. It was questionable how long he and Reginald Bull could

withstand the siege.

Crest da Zoltral was alone.

Agent Strummer removed the handcuffs, pulled the chain around the bannister, and put them back on Crest. This meant that Crest had to remain standing. The chain on the handcuffs was short and did not give him enough range of movement to sit down on the chair. Was it thoughtlessness? A deliberate dig at him? But if so, why? What was this human, the most powerful man on Earth, planning to do with him?

Crest da Zoltral found out when he heard the American president's speech.

From somewhere, a voice cried out: "Thirty seconds until we're on air!"

A corpulent woman had stepped up next to the president and was using a brush to apply make-up to his face. Drummond had his eyes closed in concentration. It was obviously a familiar process for him.

Crest noticed a display at eye level in front of the president. It showed a double-digit number, large and red. 19, 18, 17...Crest understood. It was counting down the seconds. When it reached five, the woman hurried away. The President opened his eyes and straightened his tie.

Zero.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen!" The tone of his voice was cool, free from the disgust he had shown just a few minutes ago. "I am turning to the American people at this serious time, and to all peoples of the Earth, to all of humanity. The hour has come to leave behind us obsolete categories such as nation, race or class. We humans must stand together if we want to survive."

The text of the President's speech started running across the display at the same speed at which Drummond delivered it. This

was also an art he was accomplished at. If Crest did not have the display right before him, he would never have known that Drummond was not speaking freely. The humans' technology might have been primitive, but the humans themselves were smart.

"Perhaps you are worried at the present time," Drummond continued, "about your family, your friends, about everything that affects your life. Maybe you even live in fear. Perhaps you expect me to take this fear from you." He was silent for a moment. "But I must disappoint you. Your fears and worries are justified. Humanity is standing at the edge of an abyss. We are facing the prospect of a global war. A war that will transform our breathtakingly beautiful and abundant planet into an atomic desert. A place where the living would envy the dead."

What Drummond was saying sounded unbelievable. Could humans really be so stupid?

"You are no doubt asking yourself why. What has brought us to this fateful juncture? We can find the answer to that question at the edges of a lake in the Gobi Desert. It is there that the American spaceship *Stardust* touched down after successfully flying to the moon. An unthinkable, inexplicable occurrence. And numerous stories are naturally circulating on the Internet."

Behind the stage, the wall of the room sprang to life. It formed a huge display showing the *Stardust* as it re-entered Earth's atmosphere. The images were shaky and out of focus. One of the anti-aircraft missiles that people had fired at the ship must have had a camera on it.

"Today I will bring these rumours to an end. The landing of this ship in the Gobi was neither an accident, nor is it proof of a secret conspiracy by the superpowers or the secret services. In reality, it was the result of something the *Stardust* discovered on the moon. Aliens from another planet have come to us."

The President remained silent for a few seconds. His fingers played with the sheets of paper that were lying on the lectern.

“Is that unbelievable?” he finally asked. “Perhaps. Impossible? Absolutely not. And today I would like to present to you the proof that extraterrestrials exist. Here it is!”

Drummond turned to Crest. The Arkonide froze as all eyes turned to him. The chain of the handcuffs clattered as it scraped the wooden banister when he involuntarily flinched.

“May I introduce to you...Crest da Zoltral. He is called an Arkonide. A wise man, a scientist. An exchange between humanity and his kind could be infinitely beneficial for both sides. *Could be*, I say. Because our first contact has tragically not been a peaceful one.”

Drummond shook his head in reprimand. “I just cannot understand how Perry Rhodan and the remaining crew of the *Stardust* could have failed at this historic moment, at this important juncture in human history. They have forgotten to whom they are obligated, to whom they owe thanks for the privilege they had of flying to the moon: the American people.”

Portraits of the *Stardust’s* crew appeared on the screen.

“Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bull, Dr. Eric Manoli, and Clark G. Flipper have become traitors,” the President announced. “But betrayal does not pay. It is the most heinous crime there is. A traitor places himself outside of the human community, loses every right to our consideration. We will not allow the traitors to escape what they deserve. Clark Flipper has already paid an appropriate price for his crimes. While trying to escape from the Gobi, he fell in the Himalayas and paid for what he did with his life. It is only a matter of time before the remaining traitors get the punishments they deserve. Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull will not be able to hold the landing site in the Gobi for much longer. And Dr. Manoli... Well, Dr. Manoli has already been caught.”

Drummond fell silent as a new portrait of the doctor on board the *Stardust* appeared. It showed a dejected, exhausted man. The photo must have been taken after his capture in Ethiopia.

“Dr. Manoli will have to answer for his crimes before an ordinary

court, which civilized human society demands. As will Dr. Frank Haggard, who joined the traitors. Yes, you heard me right. The winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine. He, just like Dr. Manoli, forgot the oath he took as a doctor to humanity. Humans have an obligation to other humans, not to aliens."

Drummond took a glass of water from the lectern, drank from it, and placed it down again.

"I am neither a legal expert nor a judge, and it is not my place to anticipate the outcomes of judicial procedures, but I believe that I am speaking on behalf of decent human beings everywhere when I say that only one punishment can be considered for a crime like this..."

Death? Crest asked himself in disbelief and immediately answered his own question in his head: of course. That was exactly how the Arkonide fleet dealt with traitors as well.

"And yet Dr. Manoli and Dr. Haggard, and even Perry Rhodan," the President continued, "play only minor roles in this drama, which can only have a tragic ending for us all. Minor characters whose nebulous dreams of the stars, of a new era in which, miraculously, all of the worries and hardships that have plagued humankind since the origins of our species were to become a thing of the past. In its history, humanity has seen more than one example of this kind of megalomania. Countless millions have paid the ultimate price for the sake of unworldly social experiments."

Crest did not understand what the human was talking about. But he could sense the threat that hung in the air. He pulled at the handcuffs, but the chain scraped along the banister without moving it in the slightest. The technicians had secured it tightly to the ground.

"Let us now name the real criminal: the Arkonide, Crest da Zoltral!"

The President turned round, stretched out his arm, and pointed to the the elderly alien.

“Without Crest da Zoltral and the other members of his species, humanity would not find itself standing at the edge of an abyss! The Arkonides came to our home planet without invitation. Nobody asked them to come. They did not find it necessary to ask for our permission. In fact, they did not even inform us of who they were.”

To protect you barbarians! Crest wanted to shout out, but his tongue could not formulate the words. What was happening here was outrageous. So outrageous that his mind refused to accept it.

“One might say in their defense that this was merely a huge impertinence. However, immediately following their landing on the moon, the Arkonides made perfectly clear the attitude behind their conduct: contempt for mankind!”

The president’s voice suddenly sounded as if it were coming from very far away. But that did not change the impact of his words. Crest was shaking. The chain scraped the banister once again, but now the handcuffs served as an anchor for the Arkonide, something he could hold on to for support.

“I don’t want to sugarcoat it. The Arkonides are technologically superior to humans. It was they who came to us, with a spaceship that is of a size and level of perfection that we humans can only dream of. Compared to their ships, even our pride and joy the *Stardust* is like something from the Stone Age. In that respect, we are barbarians compared to them. Uncivilized.”

Yes, Crest thought. *That’s exactly what you are! Uncivilized!*

“But morally? Let us judge these Arkonides by the only thing that counts: their deeds!”

The wall display came alive again. It showed portraits of men and women, more than a dozen. They were young and strong, laughing into the camera. They were wearing dark-colored polo-shirts with the NASA logo sewed onto the front. A black strip ran diagonally at the bottom right of the photos.

“And the deeds of the Arkonides *are* monstrous. Crest da Zoltral and the others of his species lost no time at all after their arrival,

completely destroying Armstrong Base and the other moon stations. They murdered the crews there, the bravest of the brave. In cold blood. For no reason. Human life means nothing to them. Nor do the lives of our brave astronauts who ventured into space for us."

Drummond fell silent, before calling out loudly, "Crest da Zoltral! These are the humans that you and your kind have on your conscience! Look them in the eyes!"

Tears welled up in Crest's eyes as he realized who these humans were. As he realized what he was being accused of.

Drummond, who was not familiar with Arkonide expressions and gestures, interpreted this in the wrong way. "Spare us your crocodile tears, Crest da Zoltral! They have come too late!" He turned back to the audience. "The Arkonides' contempt for humankind, coupled with their highly superior technology, make them the greatest danger we have ever faced! But we are human. We never give up. Our ancestors survived in the Savannah of Africa not due to their physical superiority, but because of their perseverance and their intelligence. It is these virtues that we have focused on, and it is upon these that we have acted."

The wall display was now showing a human rocket ascending into the sky. Was it the *Stardust*? But why...

"I am happy to be able to inform humanity this evening," the President continued, "that the danger posed by the Arkonides has been averted. The American shuttle *Starchild*, under the command of Captain Michael Freyt, managed to join the Arkonide ship. When his attempt to reach a peaceful understanding failed, Captain Freyt acted as a true patriot. He sacrificed his life for humanity and destroyed the vessel. We will never forget his sacrifice. I insist on personally handing over the Medal of Honor to his widow. It is the highest honor for bravery shown in the face of an enemy that our proud nation knows. I would like to ask each and every one of you to join me in a minute of silence in memory of our fallen hero."

A large American flag appeared on the display, fluttering solemnly in the wind.

“The Arkonide danger has been averted. Perry Rhodan is holding his position in the Gobi using a few artifacts of Arkonide technology. But that won’t last. The determination of humanity is something that not even fantastical technology can withstand.”

The president turned to the side and looked at the alien.

“It is now down to us to exercise something that is a basic need of all humans: justice. Crest da Zoltral, I hereby charge you in the name of all of humanity with murder. Humans shall be the ones who judge you, and humans shall be the ones to make sure you get the punishment you deserve!”

17.

July 11, 2036

A pale blue strip on the horizon in the east announced that dawn was coming.

Perry Rhodan lay on his back on the flat roof of one of the houses in Terrania, looking up to the sky. The energy shield was transparent, so he had an unhindered view. And there was no smog or air pollution in the Gobi to dull that view.

“Are we dreaming of the stars again?” a familiar voice said.

“It’s all I ever do; you know that.” Rhodan sat up.

“Great. And let others play at being moles!” Reginald Bull, who had come up onto the roof without making a sound, let himself down beside Rhodan. The material was hard and supportive and at the same time soft; another, if rather inconspicuous, miracle of Arkonide technology, whose secrets were just waiting to be discovered by humanity.

Rhodan grinned and patted his friend encouragingly on the back. Bull’s shirt was sticky with sweat. “And what does it feel like to be a mole?”

Reginald Bull had gotten two construction robots to bring the Arkonide engine, which weighed several tonnes, underground. He had buried himself with the engine for twenty hours. Rhodan had offered to help him, but Bull had rejected his offer along with similar offers from their other companions. Rhodan’s friend needed to spend some time alone.

“If I’m honest, the life of a mole can make you feel a little woozy. Both down there,” Bull said pointing at the ground, “and up there.” He gestured at the stars. “If you’re not careful, this Arkonide technology can end up twisting your brain in such a way that you might never straighten it out again.”

Woozy in the head, Rhodan thought. *But also happy.* Bull stank of sweat and oil, and he was covered in dirt and soot, but his eyes were sparkling. He had set himself a challenge and had become totally but cheerfully immersed in it. Had he also mastered the challenge?

"How far did you get?" Rhodan asked.

"Far. She's ready to fly, even if the propulsion diverter and the steering almost drove me insane. A little fresh air and a few more hours as a mole and I'll be done."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks for the compliment!" Bull swallowed, and the sparkle in his eyes suddenly disappeared. "I just don't know what use it will be for us. The entire world is against us. And we don't have any more Arkonides to save our skins when things get tricky."

Bull's sudden dejection was real, just as real as his high spirits during the last few hours had been. Either in a state of total happiness or as low as can be—it wasn't always easy with Reginald Bull. But one thing was certain: it was never boring when he was around. And when it really came down to it, Rhodan could trust his friend blindly.

"Something will turn up," he replied. "It always does."

"Easy for you to say." Bull lifted his arm and pointed out into the desert where the Chinese army was just waiting for its chance to attack the landing site. "What do you think? How long can we continue on before things turn bad?"

"For a very long time. The shield can't be breached, and our supplies will last for years. We—"

"It's not about our supplies. It's *theirs* I'm worried about."

Rhodan's head jerked around towards his friend, and he looked at him in disbelief from the side. "You know about that?"

Rhodan had not told him about what Darja had seen. In any

case, it was only a guess, even if it was a well-founded one, and they had enough worries of their own without racking their brains to find a solution for that problem.

“I sometimes wonder what you think of me? I might play the mole, but I’m not blind. Darja is not the only one who takes the time to climb a building every now and again to see the world from above. I steal a few minutes every day, but it’s enough. You soon get an eye for change.”

Bull lifted a hand and touched the bandage that was covering one cheek. The material was as dirty as his skin was and, in the twilight, you could hardly tell where the bandage stopped and his hand began.

“If you ask me, our general has lost his patience with the tens of thousands of friends you invited to Terrania, and he’s leaving them high and dry.”

“Reg, you’re an old scoundrel!” Rhodan said appreciatively.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. But the question remains, how long can this keep going before things turn bad?”

“To be honest, I haven’t got a clue. Months perhaps, maybe even years. Or it could be over at any moment.”

All of a sudden. they were bathed in extremely bright light. It hurt their eyes, and they could only make out nuances of white. There was silence everywhere, as if the world was holding its breath.

Then the roof below them shook violently followed by what sounded like a huge clap of thunder. In the distance, a cloud of sand and dust and soot shot into the sky and formed a giant mushroom that glowed from within.

Bull was the first to get up. “Those pig-headed idiots! They’ve detonated an atomic bomb!”

Rhodan also jumped up but remained silent. Together, the two watched as the blast rolled over the flat surface of the desert. A wall

of sand sped towards the ring of people camping in the desert. It upturned their tents and improvised huts, tore swathes of cloth and material and people with it, and worked its way outwards with undiminished power.

The blast reached the Chinese troops and tore apart the precise order of their positions. It made Rhodan think of the tableau that Darja had told him about. It was as if a huge, invisible hand was swiping away tin soldiers.

But they weren't made of tin; they were real people.

The blast sped towards the energy shield. Seconds later, it broke against the dome like waves hitting the beach. Glowing bolts of lightning flashed through the night as tents, pieces of equipment, and people who had been torn along in its path vanished in the miraculous piece of work that had been created by the Arkonides.

"The Chinese have lost their minds," Bull whispered. You could tell he had turned pale even beneath the layer of oil and dirt that covered his skin. "An atomic bomb; And then they're even too stupid to hit the shield!"

The bomb had been detonated several kilometers away from the landing site of the *Stardust*.

Why?, Rhodan asked himself. Was it misfired? Was the explosion supposed to be a warning? Or was the detonation part of a cunning plan? Was it only the beginning of a series of nuclear attacks? But, if that was so, what were they trying to achieve? The Arkonide shield could not be broken that way.

While Rhodan's was still lost in his thoughts, a second wave made its way across the desert. It was a wave of people. Terrified, panicking people who had come to the Gobi to help build a better world. People who had followed Rhodan's call and who had been held up by the Chinese troops. People afflicted with thirst, scared that their dreams were slipping through their fingers. People who had nothing left to lose.

The human wave had started running towards the Chinese lines.

In the flickering light of the atomic mushroom, they looked like toy soldiers who had come to life. Small black specks. And every speck was a human.

A few moments later, the wave reached the Chinese lines and swept over them as if they didn't even exist. How was that possible? Why had the soldiers let the people pass? Had they themselves been taken by surprise when the explosion happened? Or were they following the orders of the general, who was pursuing a devilish plan?

The people continued running towards the shield, behind which their dream slumbered: Terrania, the gateway to the stars.

They were running to a certain death unless Rhodan turned the shield off.

"Come on!" Rhodan yelled. "To the generator!"

He wanted to run, but Reginald Bull grabbed his arm and held on tight.

"What's going on?" Rhodan shouted. "What's wrong with you?"

"You want the truth? I'm scared."

"We all are! Can we talk about that later? We don't have time!"

Bull shook his head, and his grip remained tight. "Do you know why I'm afraid? Because I have to tell you something that I hate myself for. Perry, you *can't* switch off the shield!"

"What are you talking about?"

"About that!" Bull lifted his other arm and pointed at the sky. "The stars. Without the shield, our dream of the stars is over. Both of our dreams, and the dreams of all humanity. Is that what you want?"

"No."

The people panicking at their feet did not hear them. They

continued running. Running towards their dreams of reaching the stars—and towards a certain death.